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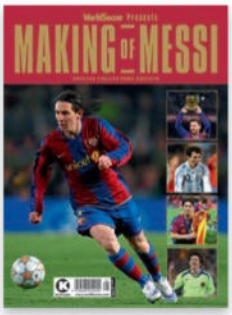

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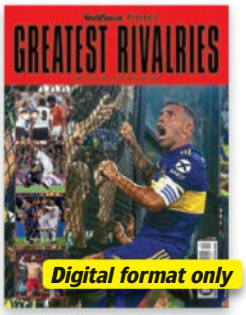

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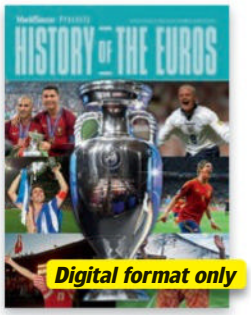

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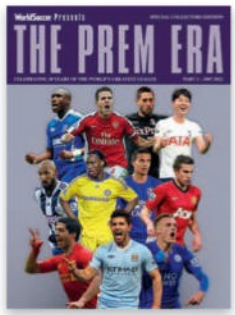

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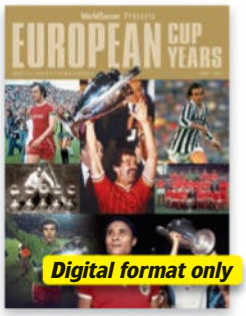

A look at the European Cup years (1955-1992) and the iconic stars that graced the tournament.

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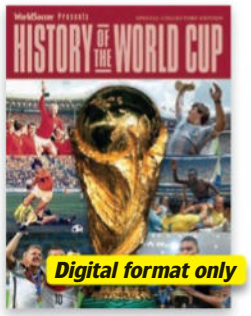

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First, *World Soccer* stalwart Steve Menary begins a new feature taking a closer look at Multi-Club Ownership groups, starting with A-League new boys Auckland FC.

Then, in the first in a series of columns, our friends from The Sweeper podcast take a look at the weird and wonderful from around the world of football.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

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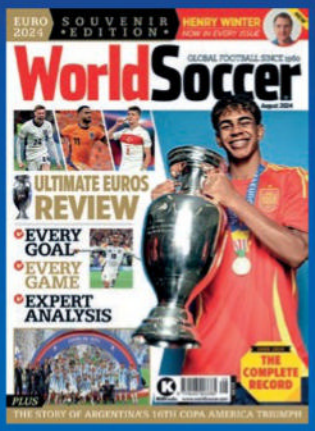

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Henry WINTER

THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

Trent would be a worthy *Galactico* – but Liverpool must try everything in their power to keep him

Transfer target... Alexander-Arnold after losing the 2022 Champions League final to Real Madrid

We're coming up to the tenth anniversary of one of the maddest decisions in Liverpool's history. I'll never forget being in the Bernabeu, looking at the Real Madrid versus Liverpool teamsheet and sharing the widespread shock that Brendan Rodgers had left Steven Gerrard and Raheem Sterling on the bench. They were understandably seething. Playing against Real, especially in their citadel on the Castellana, is what players dream of. Liverpool usually crave such challenges. "A crime against the club's history," the Spanish sports daily *AS* called Rodgers' decision.

November 4 marks ten years since that controversial moment and the shock still hasn't completely worn off. Rodgers claimed he dropped Gerrard and Sterling in response to Liverpool's loss to Newcastle United three days earlier. Bizarre. Gerrard pretty much decided that night that his Liverpool days were over. Sterling was unsettled, agitated for a move, and signed for Manchester City eight months later.

For elite players at English clubs, Real Madrid are the one step up, the benchmark, even the chance to audition. Real want only the best – Cristiano Ronaldo, Luka Modric, Gareth Bale, David Beckham, Steve McManaman, Michael Owen, Laurie Cunningham. This season, they have been linked with Trent Alexander-Arnold. Liverpool's right-back is 26, moving towards his peak. Dani Carvajal's ACL has ruled Real's right-back out for the season, highlighting the need for succession planning especially as he will be 33 on his return. Alexander-Arnold's passing would be a joy for Vinicius Junior

and Kylian Mbappe to receive. He's close with Jude Bellingham. He's talked recently of his hunger for trophies. He's more likely to win those at the Bernabeu than Anfield. Liverpool really need to sort a new contract for Alexander-Arnold soon.

His current deal expires this summer so he could talk to Real in January. It is impossible to see Alexander-Arnold moving mid-season, leaving his team-mates during a campaign. Not his style. He's too respectful. Would Liverpool's owners FSG sell him in January, their last chance to cash in? The fans would protest that.

FSG run the club as a business and make unsentimental decisions. It's strange that they haven't already sat Alexander-Arnold and his representatives down and sorted a new contract. It's never wise for a club to let a player's contract run down. And he's no ordinary employee. Alexander-Arnold is more than a player at Liverpool. He's a symbol of pride and ambition. He's the Scouser in the team, the local lad who understands what the club mean to the community. What would it say about Liverpool's aspirations if they lost Alexander-Arnold? His exit would send reverberations from the Kop to Kirkby. Others do step up, like Conor Bradley in Alexander-Arnold's position and Curtis Jones in midfield, and they may mature from colts to thoroughbreds. But Alexander-Arnold is already there, established, one of the world's elite players. Liverpool have less chance of challenging Manchester City, let alone Real Madrid, without Alexander-Arnold.

If Alexander-Arnold was making a decision based on football, he would have to go to Real. It's the emotional pull of home that has to be Liverpool's ace, as well as making him their best-paid player. If Alexander-Arnold leaves the club, Liverpool's board has to realise the supporters' backlash will be against them, and not against the Scouser no longer in the team.

What would it say about Liverpool's aspirations if they lost Alexander-Arnold? His exit would send reverberations from the Kop to Kirkby

FSG know the club's financial situation best but they have also made the mistake of letting Virgil van Dijk and Mo Salah head into the last year of their contracts. But they are in their 30s. Given current form, the pair still have a good couple of years left in them, especially the imperious Van Dijk. They would both be losses if they left but not as seismic as Alexander-Arnold.

Liverpool have to fight to keep Alexander-Arnold. Tug on the heartstrings. Promise him the captaincy after Van Dijk, remind him that he could have a statue outside Anfield one day.

Alexander-Arnold was the archetypal Jurgen Klopp player – all adrenalin, front foot, raking passes, switches to Andy Robertson – whereas Klopp's successor, Arne Slot, favours a more measured build-up. Slot's more classical than heavy metal. They go through the middle more, which has reduced one of Alexander-Arnold's strengths: his crossing.

Yet Alexander-Arnold is quite capable of adjusting, and has already been speaking about how he can develop defensively under Slot. He already looks to have improved. And that could tempt Real even more.

Bobby Charlton's legacy lives on

I covered a Shakhtar Donetsk game in Kyiv during the invasion. I was lucky, dashed in from Poland, watched the game in the Olympic Stadium, car waiting outside, rushed back to the border, home, safe. But imagine being a kid growing up in Ukraine, playing football and then the air-raid siren goes. They run to the bunker and hunker down until the danger clears. For now. And then they return to the game. Or try to. They need help. And that's where the Sir Bobby Charlton Foundation (SBCF) steps in.

Sir Bobby...his legacy continues to lives on

October 21 marked one year since the great man passed away but he continues to change lives. Charlton's charity has partnered with Shakhtar to fund coaches, pitches, kits and balls for the kids in Kyiv. They also provide on-site psychologists to work with the youngsters to help them cope with fear, stress, trauma and, often, displacement.

"The sessions are frequently interrupted by air-raid sirens and the kids are bundled into a bunker where they can sometimes be stuck for hours," says Jane Bateman of SBCF. "We are planning a fundraising campaign to raise money to improve the conditions underground, including for games such as table football to be set up in the bunkers."

Sir Bobby's legacy has been to give children in war-affected areas a chance in life. A year on, he is still sorely missed – but his generosity of spirit lives on.

Iniesta bows out

So many numbers have been used to quantify the greatness of the retiring Andres Iniesta: 57 goals in 674 appearances for Barcelona, 13 goals in 131 games for Spain, 1,016 total career games for club and country, 38 trophies. And yet two more: 90+3 and 116. Those were the respective minutes in which the sensational Spanish midfielder struck to break the hearts of Chelsea in the 2008-09 Champions League semi-final and the Netherlands in the 2010 World Cup final. Both were phenomenal finishes. To have such composure, concentration and technique when he must have been exhausted so late in such draining games truly reflects Iniesta's greatness.

Clutch player ...Iniesta after scoring in the 2010 World Cup final

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Club World Cup doubts continue

With limited TV interest, Gianni Infantino's pet project is at risk of falling apart before it has even kicked off

Club World Cup final host...New Jersey's MetLife Stadium will be the venue for the final

Football has reached a television saturation point. The only person who doesn't seem to have appreciated the fact is the president of FIFA.

Gianni Infantino was enraged when he had to bang the table to inveigle reluctant European channels into stumping up a few extra million dollars to cover the 2023 Women's World Cup in schedule-unfriendly Australia and New Zealand. Now he has come face to face with similar reticence over his pet project, next year's Club World Cup in the United States.

Nonsensically the finals of the CONCACAF Gold Cup will be staged almost simultaneously and also in the United States (and Vancouver), between June 14 and July 6 (plus the Under-21 European Championship from June 11-28). So much for the balanced international calendar.

Apple holds the worldwide media rights to the Club World Cup but so far is reported to be bringing "only" $1 billion to the table rather than the $4bn FIFA wants. Sponsors were also slow to come forward, hence FIFA's rushed September announcement of the host cities.

> The tournament itself is an oddity: club football's identity is all about annual competition

For the record, the 12 venues are: Mercedes-Benz Stadium (Atlanta), Bank of America Stadium (Charlotte), TQL Stadium (Cincinnati), Rose Bowl Stadium (Los Angeles), Hard Rock Stadium (Miami), Geodis Park (Nashville), Camping World Stadium (Orlando), Inter&Co Stadium (Orlando), Lincoln Financial Field (Philadelphia), Lumen Field (Seattle), Audi Field (Washington, D.C.) and the MetLife Stadium in New York/New Jersey which stages the final of both the CWC and the 2026 World Cup.

The field comprises 12 European clubs, including Manchester City and Real Madrid, six from South America, four each from Asia, Africa and North/Central America with one for Oceania and one for hosts the US (probably Inter Miami for Messi reasons).

Sports broadcasters the world over are largely content with the millions in rights and coverage demanded by the biennial scheduling of a World Cup then Euro-plus-Olympics. FIFA in general and Infantino in particular expected similar sums to screen the Club World Cup in between.

The tournament itself is an oddity: club football's identity is all about annual competition. A club championship staged once every four years lacks qualifying and competitive credibility; hence speculation that some clubs may send squads of reserve and academy players and rest the big stars ahead of the "real" season.

Further, the late-summer timing between June 15 and July 13 could hardly be worse for not only European TV but the 32 clubs; FIFA has already been forced into decreeing exemptions to a transfer window for clubs involved to allow the confusion of incomings and outgoings, as well as for any players whose contracts expire on June 30. Manchester City petitioned the Premier League in vain for a delayed start to the 2025-26 campaign.

Broadcast executives have also been spooked by the complaints of FIFPRO and leading players about a workload enhanced by the expansion of UEFA's club competitions. Rodri, Kevin De Bruyne, Alisson and Son Heung-min have been just a few, under pressure in an English context involving two domestic cup competitions as well as the high-intensity Premier League and likely long runs in European competition.

In June, FIFPRO's European members registered a workers' rights claim with the Brussels Court of Commerce for reference to the European Court of Justice on the legality of FIFA's unilateral creation and scheduling of the Club World Cup. The players' union then followed up on that by filing a formal complaint to the European Commission against FIFA on competition law grounds.

Obviously, no broadcaster would want to invest in an event shorn of the stars who attract ratings and, by extension, sponsors and advertisers. The target of $1bn in sponsorship cash appears increasingly fanciful. Hence the pressure on TV channels to provide cash enough to persuade the clubs to take the project seriously.

Originally, the expanded version of the competition with "only" 24 teams was to take place in China in 2023. COVID struck and brought those plans to an end; it would be the ultimate humiliation for Infantino if the 2025 plans were undone by sheer lack of interest.

KING JOHAN II

On Sunday, July 7, 1974, Johan Neeskens made World Cup history by converting the first penalty in the final's 44 years. The drama was intense; only two minutes had gone as Neeskens thundered home with West Germany goalkeeper Sepp Maier diving the wrong way.

Sadly for Neeskens, who has died at 73, nothing went right after that. Netherlands lost not only that final 2-1 but the next, four years later, in Argentina. Midfielder Neeskens was again defiant in defeat. He always committed himself 100 per cent to every tackle, offering complementary steel to the skills of Johan Cruyff. Together they won the European Cup three times with the Total Football pioneers of Ajax and then the Cup Winners' Cup and Spanish Cup with Barcelona. A magnificent legacy.

Next month's issue will feature a full special tribute to Neeskens

THE CASE AGAINST CASEMENT

Casement Park's regeneration – discussed in this column earlier this year in our May edition – was doomed the moment Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves stalked into Downing Street and tumbled down into the UK's economic black hole. Looming cost cuts ruled out the Prime Minister and Chancellor stumping up the £400m needed to rescue the project in Belfast.

First Minister Michelle O'Neill was predictably disappointed at losing the tourist buzz and investment promised by direct involvement in Euro 2028. Now, not only will Casement Park's five matches be dispersed elsewhere among the host nations, but Northern Ireland may not even be able to rely on projected special treatment in terms of automatic qualification.

Truth be said, the failure of the Casement Park project was not only a matter of money and local politics, it was also out of time.

Dutch legend...Netherlands midfielder Johan Neeskens scores in the 1974 World Cup final

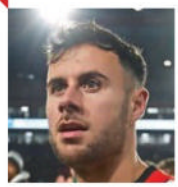
BOOKS THIS MONTH

RISE OF THE UNDERDOGS
By Bence Bocsak
(Pitch Publishing, £14.99)

Rise of the Underdogs is the ultimate guide to the changing landscape of modern football. With stories like Croatia – a nation of just four million people – reaching the World Cup final and Morocco writing African football history, to icons such as Erling Haaland, Khvicha Kvaratskhelia and Mohamed Salah, it explores how football clubs and associations are breaking down barriers through features and insight from coaches, players and other professionals.

THE LIFE OF TOTAL FOOTBALL
By James Jackson
(Pitch Publishing, £18.99)

The Life of Total Football tells the story of the origins, history and inspiration behind one of the purest styles of football. Made famous by Johan Cruyff, Ajax and the Netherlands national team in the 1970s, its story starts a long way before then. With roots in Scotland, Europe and South America, this is an enthralling in-depth look at the impact, culture and influence of Total Football on the game's history.



"The national team and the Greek Football Federation bid farewell to George Baldock. There are no words to describe the human pain by the news of the unexpected loss of one of our own, young, man"

The Greece national team pays respect to George Baldock, who tragically passed away at the age of 31

OBITUARIES

Wild-eyed, wide-armed...Schillaci celebrates scoring against Argentina at Italia '90

Salvatore SCHILLACI (1964-2024)
"Toto" Schillaci was the ultimate example of a shooting star, in more ways than one. He had played only one season in Serie A with Juventus, scoring 15 goals and winning the UEFA Cup, when he was named in the hosts' 1990 World Cup squad. As Italy struggled to break down Austria in their opening game, coach Azeglio Vicini sent on Schillaci who duly scored the winner.

Schillaci finished as the finals' six-goal top scorer, however his wild-eyed, wide-armed goal celebration was seen only once more in a 16-cap international career. He never again matched that *Notti Magiche* form for Italy, Juve or Inter before moving to Japan with Jubilo Iwata. He said: "For the people there, the World Cup never ended and I was the Schillaci of 1990." He responded with 56 goals in 78 games.

Johan NEESKENS (1951-2024)
Dutch football great.
See page 15, and a full tribute next month

Pierre ALONZO (1940-2024)
One of the pioneers of PSG, joining as head of the academy in 1976, six years after the club was formed. He was later interim boss of the seniors three times as well as coaching Bastia and Nice.

Cesare POLI (1945-2024)
A midfielder or full-back in the Cagliari team that shocked Italian football by winning Serie A in 1970, playing 11 times in the Sardinian club's first and only title.

Aston Villa legend... Gary Shaw in 1987

Greece international... Baldock won 12 caps

Sam MALCOLMSON (1947-2024)
Born in Dumfries, Malcolmson played for clubs in Scotland and Northern Ireland before emigrating in 1974 to New Zealand and taking up citizenship. Made his All Whites debut in 1976 and was the oldest member of their squad at the 1982 World Cup in Spain.

DENILSON Custodio Machado (1943-2024)
Ex-Fluminense winger with a penchant for stepovers long before Cristiano Ronaldo, who featured twice for Brazil in their disastrous World Cup defence in 1966.

IVAIR Ferreira (1945-2024)
A goalscoring winner of the NASL Soccer Bowl with Toronto Blizzard in 1976. Played once for Brazil where he enjoyed a long club career with Portuguesa, Corinthians, Fluminense, America and Paysandu.

Barry LLOYD (1949-2024)
Captained Fulham from midfield and made more than 280 appearances for the West London club. Also played for Brentford, Hereford, Chelsea and Houston Hurricane, and later managed Brighton.

Gary SHAW (1961-2024)
Named PFA Young Player of the Year in 1981 after scoring 18 goals as Aston Villa won the English league title for the first time in more than 70 years. A year later he was voted European Young Player of the Year for his goalscoring role in Aston Villa's triumphant 1982 European Cup campaign. European Cup-winning strike partner Peter Withe described their partnership as "telepathic".

Shaw was named in England's preliminary squad of 40 for the World Cup in Spain but was overlooked for the finals and later saw his national team prospects wrecked by a knee injury.

He scored 79 goals in 213 games for the club he had joined as a 16-year-old apprentice, taking his Villa chance after the injury-enforced retirement of Brian Little. Later played in Denmark, Austria, Scotland and Hong Kong.

George BALDOCK (1993-2024)
The English-born Greece international joined Panathinaikos earlier this summer after seven years at Sheffield United. The right-back started his career at MK Dons and also had loan spells at Tamworth, Northampton Town and Oxford United.

Roberto CHALE (1946-2024)
The midfielder was one of the heroes of the Peru team that qualified for the 1970 World Cup at the expense of Argentina then went on to reach the quarter-finals.

Jim McLAUGHLIN (1940-2024)
Scored six goals in 12 matches in the 1960s for Northern Ireland alongside a club career in the Republic of Ireland, England and Wales before achieving notable success as a manager in the League of Ireland. Won multiple league titles with Dundalk, Shamrock Rovers, Derry City and Shelbourne.

Lord OUSELEY (1945-2024)
Herman Ouseley was an anti-racism activist who founded Kick It Out in 1993.

Gheorghe MULTESCU (1951-2024)
Hit three goals in 16 games for Romania between 1974 and 1983 while playing the majority of his club career with Jiul Petrosanu and Dinamo Bucharest. His 37-year coaching career took in spells in Romania, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Domingo PEREZ (1936-2024)
A double South American champion with Uruguay for whom he also played at the 1962 and 1966 World Cup finals.

Bobby THOMSON (1937-2024)
Scored 20 goals from inside-right to fire Aston Villa into the top flight in 1960, before winning the League Cup in 1961. Later played for Birmingham City.

Fabian CABALLERO (1978-2024)
The Paraguayan spent five seasons at Dundee and was also on Arsenal's books.

Istvan JUHASZ (1945-2024)
Midfielder who won Olympic gold with Hungary in 1968 and the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup with Ferencvaros in 1965.

Horst WEIGANG (1940-2024)
An Olympic bronze medal winner as back-up keeper for East Germany in the 1964 Tokyo Games. Also won 12 senior caps and was a domestic league and cup runner-up with Lokomotive Leipzig.

Imre KOMORA (1940-2024)
Olympic gold medal-winning midfielder and winger with Hungary at Tokyo 1964 who played for and managed Honved.

Words by Keir Radnedge

Jim HOLDEN

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

Rarely prolific, always adored

The career of the late Salvatore Schillaci sums up Italian football's relationship with its strikers

"Ciao Toto" read the banners at every stadium from Rome to Milan to Naples in the days after Salvatore Schillaci passed away too soon at the age of 59.

The Golden Boot winner at the 1990 World Cup wasn't just an idol in his native Sicily; he was adored by every Italian football fan for his joyous, wild-eyed goal celebrations and his unbridled passion scampering around in the *Azzurri* shirt.

It was never in doubt that Italian football lovers, the *Tifosi*, would say an emotional farewell all over the land to honour a unique sporting hero.

"Toto" Schillaci only scored seven international goals, with all but one of them coming at Italia '90. He was a blazing comet for one memorable and unforgettable tournament played to the operatic soundtrack of *Nessun Dorma*.

In the history of the World Cup, there has never been another Golden Boot winner quite like him, nor one with so few goals outside the finals. You have to go back to the first tournament in 1930, a totally different sporting era, where Guillermo Stabile scored all eight of his international goals for Argentina.

The thing is, strikers have never had to be prolific to be idolised in Italy – or a "Bomber," as they prefer to call it.

That's clear in records of three other *Azzurri* legends who have died recently and sparked a similar wave of national grieving. Paolo Rossi scored a mere 20 international goals, Gianluca Vialli only 16. The greatest of them all was Luigi Riva, Italy's all-time record marksman with just 35 goals.

Why were they so revered? The answer is that they scored vital goals in big moments and big tournaments. They were in the right place at the right time when it really mattered. They were precious. They were the kings of the most difficult art in football.

It prompts another question, of course: why, given their obvious talent, didn't they score as many as the Golden Boot greats of other major footballing nations like Gerd Muller, Gary Lineker, Eusebio and Ronaldo?

The answer here is absolutely to do with the almost puritanical culture of Italian soccer. The emphasis is always on the team first and individuals second. Then it's on defensive strength and security. Then it's on tactics, a profound delight in seeing angles and space and patterns of play.

The *Tifosi* will tell you with pride this is why they have won four World Cups, two European Championships and reached four other major finals. They will tell you their strikers don't need to score cheap goals to be champions.

Another element of explanation, another aspect of Italian soccer, is that very few matches finish with heavy one-sided scorelines. For example, when Roma beat Empoli 7-0 last season, the headlines did not celebrate a goal-fest as they would in England or Germany. Instead, the headlines declared it to be "*Esagerato*" – an exaggeration rather than a cause for merriment. Why waste effort scoring goals that don't matter, and why leave an opponent humiliated?

One consequence of that is few easy goals for strikers to boost their individual records. But supporters in Italy don't care about that. The tally of 35 in internationals by Riva is more than equivalent, they will say, to the 71 notched by Miroslav Klose for Germany.

Riva is the only player to go above 30 goals for Italy in the last seven decades. Almost equally loved is his team-mate Roberto Boninsegna, whose goal in the 1970 World Cup final was one of only nine scored for Italy. Francesco Totti, a World Cup winner in 2006, also netted only nine international goals. Roberto Baggio and Alessandro Del Piero (another winner in 2006) are the best of the modern era on 27 goals apiece; Christian Vieiri scored 23.

Supporters don't mind. Advertisers and sponsors don't mind. Vieri appears on Italian television screens almost every night in a commercial where he advises the nation to "shave like a BOMBER". The next one will feature Del Piero selling a brand of water that keeps your bones healthy.

Both are products of a culture that through the years has delivered remarkably robust strength to Italian soccer.

***Ciao Toto*...tributes paid to Schillaci before September's Milan derby at the San Siro**

Schillaci only scored seven international goals, with all but one of them coming at Italia '90

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

The Argentina legacy

In the modern game, no country produces international managers like the country of Jose Pekerman, Marcelo Bielsa and Jorge Sampaoli

When Mauricio Pochettino was appointed manager of the USA, he joined a growing tradition. In recent years, football coaches have become one of Argentina's great exports.

With the former Chelsea man's appointment, there are now ten Argentinian head coaches of FIFA member nations. This is not actually the most – Spain and Italy have 11 each, as do England depending on how you categorise Lee Carsley – but no other nation so dominates one confederation and none has so many coaches of what might be termed major nations.

It's true that there are Italian coaches managing the likes of Turkey, Hungary and Belgium, and that there are Argentinians coaching Cambodia and the Dominican Republic, but seven of the CONMEBOL nations are coached by Argentinians. Were the World Cup qualifiers to end today and Paraguay to win their intercontinental play-off, eight of the sides at the 2026 World Cup would be managed by Argentinians.

This is a phenomenon that has been growing slowly. Marcelo Bielsa and Jorge Sampaoli were hugely successful with Chile, Jose Pekerman had a huge influence over Colombia, and Gerardo Martino took Paraguay to the 2011 Copa America final. In 2015, all four semi-finalists at the Copa had Argentinian coaches; in 2016, three of the four did. But it's in the past couple of years that the phenomenon has really taken off.

In part, it's an issue of language; all but one of the ten members of CONMEBOL are Spanish-speaking so it's easier for Argentinians to travel than, say, Brazilians.

In part, it's an attitude. Since the days of the *Oriundi*, the Argentinian players of European heritage who returned to Europe to play – three of the Italy side that won the 1934 World Cup were born in Argentina – it's been common for Argentinians to leave home to pursue their careers. There is no sense of stigma about leaving, little fear about moving to a new environment, and a belief that adaptation will simply happen. "The Argentinian," said the former Argentina defender Roberto Perfumo, "is a cockroach. The cockroach is antediluvian but survived everything. The Argentinian is the same. He overcomes all adversities: he plays in the snow, in the mountains, at altitude, in the heat, without understanding the language, at any time..."

Latest appointment ...in September Mauricio Pochettino became the latest international coach from Argentina

> Were qualifying to end today, eight of the sides at the 2026 World Cup would be managed by Argentinians

Influential... Marcelo Bielsa and Jose Pekerman have each coached three South American national teams

There's also perhaps something in the Argentinian approach to football. Other than the Dutch, probably no other nation is so obsessed by discussing it in theoretical terms. This is the country of *Bilardismo* v *Menottismo*, the battle of ideas between Argentina's first two World Cup-winning coaches, and more recently of *Bielsismo*. That has clearly conditioned how Argentinians think about the game, their willingness to export not merely a mentality but styles of play. Bielsa's importance to Chile wasn't just that they qualified for the World Cup, it was that he gave them an identity, a style of play that Sampaoli was then able to develop into two Copa America wins. "They look for us because we are lovers of tactics," said Gustavo Alfaro, who led Ecuador at the last World Cup but is now in charge of Paraguay after a spell with Costa Rica. "We have different ideological schools that have nurtured and forged us."

Yet while Bielsa and his characteristic hard-pressing continues to thrive with Uruguay, the majority of Argentinian coaches are no longer so dogmatic. The influence of Pekerman is strong. He and Hugo Tocalli put together a youth setup that brought five World

Youth Cups in seven tournaments (from 1995 to 2007) and it is the players from those teams who are now making their mark as coaches. Lionel Scaloni is one, and in his backroom staff he has two more in Pablo Aimar and Walter Samuel.

There is a flexibility of approach. The modern Argentina side presses, but not idealistically. It plays to one enormous and obvious strength, Lionel Messi, but is not a one-man team. At the last World Cup, there was constant tinkering: sometimes a back three, sometimes a back four, changes in the shape and balance of midfield, according to the opposition.

This is something the Argentinian FA has been keen to stress. There was a concern perhaps a decade ago that Argentinian football had become too *Bielsista*, that the football being played generally in Argentina was too quick, too direct, lacking subtlety and sophistication: Bielsa football played without Bielsa quality. There was a deliberate attempt to encourage diversity, and that has prompted the current blossoming. There is a sense that Argentinians can adapt wherever they go.

Pochettino is typical in that he was discovered by Bielsa but his football is not especially *Bielsista*. He understands the principles but amends them and develops them. His US team will press, because they are a physically imposing team and because that's how Pochettino likes his sides to play, but it will not be the hell-for-leather press of a Bielsa team. Rather it will be considered and flexible, and will adapt to circumstance and opponents, because these days that's what Argentinian coaching is.

ARGENTINA'S INTERNATIONAL COACHES

Lionel **SCALONI** *(Argentina)*
Felix **DALMAS** *(Cambodia)*
Ricardo **GARECA** *(Chile)*
Nestor **LORENZO** *(Colombia)*
Marcelo **NEVELEFF** *(Dominican Rep)*
Sebastian **BECCACECE** *(Ecuador)*
Gustavo **ALFARO** *(Paraguay)*
Marcelo **BIELSA** *(Uruguay)*
Mauricio **POCHETTINO** *(USA)*
Fernando **BATISTA** *(Venezuela)*

REPORTS WE COULDN'T MAKE UP

Back in action... Rico last played in 2022 while on loan at Mallorca before his debut for Al Gharafa

1 COMA COMEBACK

Spanish goalkeeper Sergio Rico joining Qatari outfit Al Gharafa, three months after his Paris Saint-Germain contract expired, was a happy conclusion to what was very nearly a tragic tale. In May 2023, the 31-year-old was on a pilgrimage to El Rocio in Andalusia as part of a religious festival when he was struck by a runaway donkey pulling a cart, causing serious injuries to his head and neck. After 36 days in intensive care, 19 of which he spent in a coma, he was discharged in August 2023, but had to wait until April of this year to be given the all-clear to play football again. Rico made his debut for Al Gharafa in their 4-2 AFC Champions League Elite victory over Emirati side Al Ain – his first competitive appearance since May 2022 – but the fact that he is able to play at all is a miracle.

2 LIFE'S A PITCH

There were also unlikely injuries for USWNT and Washington Spirit forward Croix Bethune and Bolton Wanderers striker Victor Adeboyejo – although thankfully not life-threatening like Rico's. Bethune's season was ended by a knee injury sustained after she threw the first pitch – a ceremonial event at most Major League Baseball matches – of a Washington Nationals game, while Adebojeyo was undone by one of his own sneezes. "Victor is a powerful boy and even his sneezes are powerful," his manager Ian Evatt told *The Bolton News*. "He felt a bit of a crack in between his ribs and we are hopeful it is just a cartilage or muscular issue."

3 DISASTROUS DEBUT

Spare a thought for ex-Roma and England defender Chris Smalling, whose debut in the Saudi Pro League was an unmitigated disaster. In his first game since leaving the Italian capital for Al Fayha, the 34-year-old got off to a terrible start when he turned a cross into his own net after just six minutes. Then, ten minutes after the restart, Smalling's night was brought to an early end when he was shown a straight red card for denying a goalscoring opportunity. Al Fayha went on to lose 5-0.

4 PC PROTEST

Forever the maverick, Jose Mourinho once again made headlines for some recent unconventional behaviour. After Fenerbahce striker Edin Dzeko had a goal ruled out for offside by VAR in the game versus Antalyaspor, the 61-year-old coach strode over to a pitchside TV camera and placed his laptop in front of it to show an image that he believed proved the goal should have stood. Referee Cihan Aydin subsequently booked him for his protest. In his post-match press conference, Mourinho said: "For us it's a good goal. So, I didn't say one single word. I didn't make any kind of pressure. I just put the laptop there."

5 TESTING TESTIMONIAL

Borussia Dortmund used the September international break to hand fitting tributes to two modern club legends: Lukasz Piszczek and Jakub Blaszczykowski. After the two Poles each led out sides in a testimonial match at the Westfalenstadion, with current Dortmund head coach Nuri Sahin and legendary manager Jurgen Klopp in the dugouts, they then took on a more unconventional opposition: 100 children. Despite a questionable dive by Piszczek to win a controversial penalty, the kids managed to pull off a shock win.

Tough opponents ...Piszczek and Blaszczykowski's unique opposition

"Finally the nightmare is over. I can look forward to the day when I can follow my dreams again. I always stated that I never knowingly breached World Anti-Doping Agency regulations"

Paul Pogba after his four-year doping ban was reduced to 18 months by CAS, meaning he can return to football in March 2025

12 MOVES *you might have missed…*

TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS

Victor OSIMHEN

Thanks to the Turkish transfer window staying open longer than Europe's major leagues, Osimhen was able to secure a loan move from **Napoli to Galatasaray** in early September.

Wojciech SZCZESNY

Five weeks after announcing his retirement, the Polish goalkeeper returned to football to help solve **Barcelona's** keeper crisis caused by an injury to Marc-Andre ter Stegen.

Stefano PIOLI

Following his exit from Milan in the summer, the Italian will now manage Cristiano Ronaldo at **Al Nassr** after the Saudi Pro League side dismissed Portuguese head coach Luis Castro.

Ivan PERISIC

After a fairy-tale return to boyhood club Hajduk Split didn't work out, largely due to injury, the 35-year-old Croatia winger joined Dutch giants **PSV** on a one-year deal.

Claude MAKELELE

A year after leaving a coaching role with Chelsea, the former France midfielder took charge of Greek top-flight side **Asteras Tripolis**, his third senior managerial role.

Aliou CISSE

Senegal parted company with their former midfielder after nine and a half years as coach. Cisse's contract expired in August, but it took until October for a decision to be made.

Anthony MARTIAL

Having failed to find a new club after his contract at Manchester United expired in the summer, the French forward joined Greek top-flight side **AEK Athens** in mid-September.

Tony POPOVIC

A veteran of **Australia's** 2006 World Cup campaign, Popovic was named as the Socceroos coach – replacing Graham Arnold after some poor results in World Cup qualifying.

Miralem PJANIC

The former Bosnia & Herzegovina, Juventus and Barcelona midfielder joined **CSKA Moscow** after spending the last two seasons in the United Arab Emirates with Sharjah FC.

Dejan LOVREN

Another beneficiary of a league's late transfer window, the ex-Liverpool defender agreed a deal with **Lyon** to end his contract a year early in order to join Greek champions **PAOK**.

Adrien RABIOT

After Rabiot joined **Marseille from Juventus** on a free, fellow PSG graduate Mamadou Sakho offered his thoughts: "I'd prefer to end my career rather than wear the Marseille shirt."

Lucas OCAMPOS

A two-time Europa League winner with **Sevilla**, the Argentine winger joined Mexican giants **Monterrey** for around €7m after five years and over 200 games in Spain.

"Being on the pitch is over. I can't stay away from football, it's my life and will continue to be my life...All these tears we have shed these days are tears of emotion, of pride. They are not tears of sadness"

Spain and Barcelona legend Andres Iniesta announces his retirement at the age of 40 during an emotional press conference

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

14

Age of Arsenal academy starlet Max Dowman when he scored for the club's Under-19s in the UEFA Youth League against Atalanta, becoming the competition's youngest-ever goalscorer.

1

Appearances made by French centre-back Raphael Varane at new club Como before he was forced into retirement by a knee injury at the age of 31.

5

Number of 2026 World Cup stadiums that will host matches at the 2025 CONCACAF Gold Cup after the confederation revealed the competition's 14 venues for next summer in the United States and Canada.

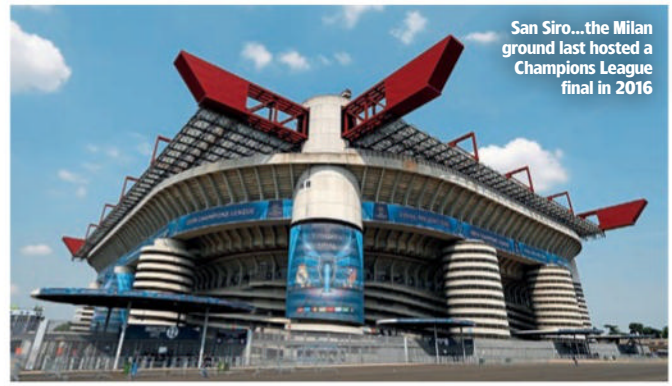
11

Goals scored in Bayern Munich's 9-2 thrashing of Dinamo Zagreb – the joint-second highest tally in Champions League history. The defeat also cost Dinamo head coach Sergej Jakirovic his job.

Demolition... the scoreboard during Bayern's thrashing of Dinamo Zagreb

50

Fulham striker Raul Jimenez is only the second Mexican, after Javier Hernandez, to net a half-century of goals in the English Premier League. He's also only the third Mexican to score 100 goals in European football alongside Chicharito and national team legend Hugo Sanchez.



San Siro...the Milan ground last hosted a Champions League final in 2016

2027

UEFA needs to find a new host for the 2027 Champions League final after Milan authorities "could not guarantee that the San Siro stadium and its surroundings would not be affected by refurbishment works."

62,000

Projected future capacity of Manchester City's Etihad Stadium after expansion plans were confirmed. The work is due to be completed in 2026.

11

Years since Algeria's record goalscorer and appearance maker Islam Slimani left his home country, before re-joining former club CR Belouizdad in September.

15

First-team players that Chelsea currently have out on loan – more than any other Premier League club – after David Datro Fofana joined Goztepe in September.

6

Months that Samuel Eto'o, president of the Cameroonian Football Federation, has been banned by FIFA for attending any international matches involving the African country.

9

Goal conceded by Heerenveen in their Eredivisie clash against AZ. The 9-1 setback was a record league defeat for the club and came in just Robin van Persie's fourth game as a first-team boss.

74

Wales caps won by midfielder Joe Allen before he came out of international retirement for new Dragons boss Craig Bellamy.

5

CAF Super Cups won by Egyptian giants Zamalek after they defeated arch-rivals and record eight-time winners Al Ahly on penalties in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

4

Goals that Andy Carroll scored in his first two games for new club Girondins de Bordeaux, who were demoted to the French fourth tier at the start of the season.

Instant impact... Bordeaux's Andy Carroll

46

Trophies Lionel Messi has now won after firing Inter Miami to the MLS Supporters' Shield for the first time in the club's history.

Full review to follow next month

710

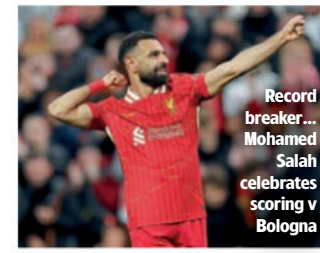
Bayern Munich matches played by Thomas Muller as he surpassed Sepp Maier at the top of the club's all-time appearance charts.

9

Months that Mexico forward Carlos Vela spent without a team before re-joining Los Angeles FC, the club that released him in January.

45

Champions League goals scored by Liverpool star Mohamed Salah after he notched against Bologna in October, taking him past Ivory Coast legend Didier Drogba as the competition's top-scoring African.



Record breaker... Mohamed Salah celebrates scoring v Bologna

36

World Cup and European Championship appearances made by Antoine Griezmann, who announced his international retirement. No one has played more major tournament games for France.

1,016

Total career appearances for club and country by Andres Iniesta, who announced his retirement following a season with UAE club Emirates.

Special feature to follow in our January Awards issue

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

David Raya (Arsenal)	3
Michele Di Gregorio (Juventus)	2
Alisson (Liverpool)	1
Peter Gulacsi (RB Leipzig)	1
Franco Israel (Sporting)	1
Vanja Milinkovic-Savic (Torino)	1
Jan Oblak (Atletico Madrid)	1
Yann Sommer (Internazionale)	1

DEFENDERS

Gabriel (Arsenal)	5
Bremer (Juventus)	4
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	4
Riccardo Calafiori (Arsenal)	3
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	3
Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	2
Giovanni Di Lorenzo (Napoli)	2
William Saliba (Arsenal)	2
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	1
Alessandro Buongiorno (Napoli)	1
Juan Cabal (Juventus)	1
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	1
Federico Gatti (Juventus)	1
Raphael Guerreiro (Bayern Munich)	1
Josko Gvardiol (Manchester City)	1
Achraf Hakimi (Paris Saint-Germain)	1
Caio Henrique (Monaco)	1
Ibrahima Konate (Liverpool)	1
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	1
Ferland Mendy (Real Madrid)	1
David Raum (RB Leipzig)	1
Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Cole Palmer (Chelsea)	9
Florian Wirtz (Bayer Leverkusen)	4
Ryan Gravenberch (Liverpool)	3
Giovani Lo Celso (Real Betis)	2
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	2
Michael Olise (Bayern Munich)	2
Davide Frattesi (Internazionale)	1
Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg (Marseille)	1
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	1
Stanislav Lobotka (Napoli)	1
Aleksandar Pavlovic (Bayern Munich)	1
Pedri (Barcelona)	1
Rodri (Manchester City)	1
Federico Valverde (Real Madrid)	1
Joey Veerman (PSV)	1

FORWARDS

Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	8
Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	8
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	6
Lamine Yamal (Barcelona)	4
Bradley Barcola (Paris Saint-Germain)	2
Viktor Gyokeres (Sporting)	2
Khvicha Kvaratskhelia (Napoli)	2
Omar Marmoush (Eintracht Frankfurt)	2
Kerem Akturkoglu (Benfica)	1
Christian Pulisic (Milan)	1
Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid)	1

ESM MEMBERS:
A Bola (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *Tipsbladet* (Denmark), *ELF Voetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

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Copa Libertadores

Semi-final stage of South America's elite club competition throws up an unexpected meeting between two famous old names

One semi-final of the Copa Libertadores is a meeting of recent competition heavyweights. Winners in 2013, Brazil's Atletico Mineiro put in a strong challenge in each of the previous three seasons, while Argentina's River Plate were the last non-Brazilian champions, in 2018. Since then, they have reached finals and semi-finals and taken part in the knockout phase of every campaign.

The other semi-final is different. Penarol of Uruguay and Botafogo of Brazil are famous old names of South American football, proudly boasting of glorious traditions, but it is a long time since either threatened to win South America's premier club prize.

Penarol were the first champions, in 1960, and have five titles to their name. But the last one was all the way back in 1987, just before the global market in footballers opened up for business, which had such dire consequences for the domestic Uruguayan game. Reaching the 2011 final is the only time in more than 20 years that they caught a sniff of title number six; in fact, this is the first time they have even made it out of the group phase since then.

Botafogo, meanwhile, are one of the famous names of Brazilian football, supplying many of the greats – Garrincha, Didi, Nilton Santos, Mario Zagallo, Jairzinho, Gerson – to Brazil's World Cup-winning sides. But their Libertadores record is thin. In the glory years, participation was restricted – Brazil had only one or two slots – the club reached the semis in 1963 and 1973, but then made barely a dent, with a quarter-final appearance in 2017 an exception. By then Botafogo were Rio's poor relation, by some distance the city's fourth force (behind Flamengo, Fluminense and Vasco da Gama) yo-yoing between the first and second divisions, massively in debt and without an obvious survival strategy.

Then came a law change enabling Brazil's clubs to turn themselves into businesses. In came US billionaire John Textor as the new owner, and with extraordinary speed a second-division club have been transformed into a team strong enough to fight for the domestic league title as well as the Libertadores.

Money, of course, is a key part of the story. But it is not the only part. Textor can play up to the image of the eccentric rich American, but his greatest triumph has been to appoint an excellent scouting department and then let them get on with it. Last year, their first back in the top flight, the aim was survival through solidity. Botafogo brought in physically strong players and a functional attack based on powerful wingers – they could launch the counter without committing too many players forward – and an experienced centre-forward to be both a penalty-area target man and a back-to-goal reference in a deeper role.

Penarol and Botafogo are famous old names of South American football, but it is a long time since either threatened to win South America's premier club prize

It was an approach that took them close to the 2023 Brazilian championship, until an emphatic collapse of no wins in their last 11 games saw them slip from first to fifth, causing Textor to cast some outlandish conspiracy theories. Victory over Palmeiras, the team that usurped them at the top of the table, in the last 16 of this year's Copa was particularly gratifying.

This year, both at the start and in the mid-2024 window, they have expanded their repertoire by bringing in more quality – Argentine World Cup playmaker Thiago Almada, full-backs Vitinho and Alex Telles, plus striker Igor Jesus, signed from Emirati club Shabab Al Ahli. The sign of a sound collective project, well coached by Portugal's Artur Jorge, is that all of them have slotted in seamlessly. Indeed, along with winger Luiz Henrique, signed from Real Betis at the start of the year, Igor Jesus has been called up by Brazil.

The tale of Penarol in 2024 is both very different and also strangely similar. The difference, of course, is the size of the budget – Uruguayan clubs get by on a fraction of the resources available in Brazil – but this, too, is a story of a successful recruitment policy.

Shock semi-finalists...Botafogo celebrate beating Sao Paulo in the quarter-finals

Lassana Diarra

Landmark case of former France midfielder brings current transfer rules into question

Uruguayan underdogs... Penarol forward Facundo Batista after the victory over Flamengo

Recent Penarol teams have often been built around the best products of the club's youth academy. Teams might flower briefly, but then fall apart after the sale of the likes of Brian Rodriguez, Facundo Pellistri or Facundo Torres. The 2024 side, though, stayed together even after being crowned Apertura champions unbeaten in June. It is also older, with central midfielder Damian Garcia, from last year's triumphant Uruguay Under-20 side (World Cup winners and South American runners-up), the lone recent youth product. Most of his team-mates have been brought in this year, with the key ones – versatile striker Maxi Silvera and wonderful left-footed playmaker Leo Fernandez – coming home after unsuccessful spells in Brazil.

It is a team, then, filled with solid common sense rather than youthful promise, and it proved good enough to get past Flamengo in the quarters (read more on page 74). Botafogo will prove an even tougher challenge, but Penarol will not be overawed. Coach Diego Aguirre knows what it is to be a Libertadores champion: his goal in the final minute of extra-time won the club's last title, back in 1987. He can dream of being the living link between title number five and number six.

Tim Vickery

FIFA's lawyers will almost certainly need to rewrite the small print in the world federation's transfer regulations after a European Court of Justice ruling in the long-running case brought by Lassana Diarra.

The former France, Chelsea, Arsenal, Real Madrid and Paris Saint-Germain midfielder incurred a suspension and €10 million fine for breach of contract after exiting Russian club Lokomotiv Moscow in 2014. However, a year later FIFA denied him the essential international transfer certificate (ITC) when he sought to revive his career in Belgium with Charleroi.

The Belgian club insisted they owed Lokomotiv nothing by way of a FIFA-imposed compensation fee for the midfielder. The move collapsed and eventually, after he had served his suspension, he joined Marseille before brief spells with Al Jazira in the UAE and PSG before retiring in 2019.

Diarra then took up his legal action in the Belgian courts against FIFA. He is represented by Jean-Louis Dupont, the Belgian lawyer whose work brought about football's revolutionary Bosman judgment in December 1995. Some observers suggested that the Diarra case would bring about a similar cataclysm, but the European Court has long since validated football's contract and transfer system as essential for maintaining stability within the structure of the professional and international game.

In its judgment, the European Court said: "The rules in question are such as to impede the free movement of professional footballers wishing to develop their activity by going to work for a new club."

Dupont said other players punished "by these illegal rules" could also sue for compensation and that the entire transfer system was threatened.

This was disputed by FIFA: "FIFA is satisfied that the legality of key principles of the transfer system have been reconfirmed in today's ruling. The ruling only puts in question two paragraphs of two articles of the FIFA regulations on the status and transfer of players, which the national court is now invited to consider."

After the ruling FIFPRO, the international players' union, declared that "FIFA will be forced to amend" their rules around transfers, adding: "It is clear the ECJ has ruled unequivocally that central parts of the FIFA Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players are incompatible with European Union law."

Ian Giles, EMEA Head of Antitrust and Competition at global law firm Norton Rose Fulbright, said: "This judgment has potentially very significant implications for FIFA's transfer system. It's entirely possible this means players will feel they can now break contracts and sign on with new clubs...This will likely result in reduced transfer fees and more economic power for players.

> "It is clear the ECJ has ruled unequivocally that central parts of the FIFA Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players are incompatible with European Union law"
>
> FIFPRO on the European Court of Justice ruling

"The key question now for FIFA will be how they can adapt their transfer rules so that they are compatible with EU law, while seeking to maintain the stability of playing squads."

The European Court assessment now reverts to the Belgian courts for a verdict, including the contested issue of compensation.

Keir Radnedge

France midfielder ...Diarra won 34 international caps

Algeria

Bosnian coach Vladimir Petkovic has faced a challenging first year in charge of the former African champions

Since a deserved triumph at the 2019 Africa Cup of Nations, Algeria have been battling to grasp the new dawn that their success hinted at.

An increasing pool of players from the diaspora in France promised to be the mainstay of continued success under coach Djamel Belmadi, himself the embodiment of the passionately committed French-born son of migrants from north Africa.

It all looked to be going to plan as Algeria went to defend their title at the next finals in Cameroon, held in early 2022, taking with them to the tournament a remarkable 35-game unbeaten record.

But after a goalless draw with Sierra Leone and a 1-0 defeat to minnows Equatorial Guinea, Algerian expectations came crashing down with a first-round exit, followed by a dramatic last-gasp reversal in their World Cup play-off against Cameroon just two months later, meaning they missed out on going to Qatar.

Belmadi managed to hang on to his job, but failure again at this year's Cup of Nations finals in the Ivory Coast, with Algeria once more going home early after a limp campaign, meant the former Manchester City midfielder was shown the door.

Vladimir Petkovic arrived in his place in February, bringing with him the experience of serving as Switzerland's coach from 2014 to 2021, taking in two European Championships and a World Cup tournament where the Swiss had successfully advanced to the knockout stages.

His profile and career, which also includes managerial stints in Serie A and Ligue 1, has done little to temper Algerian expectations and this constant pressure to succeed has meant a difficult baptism of fire for the 61-year-old Bosnian coach.

Riyad Mahrez's omission from his first squad did not make the job any easier, and then a home defeat to Guinea in the World Cup qualifier in June ratcheted up the tension, although Algeria still lead the group and remain favourites for a place in the 2026 finals in North America.

Captain...Riyad Mahrez was briefly left out of the squad earlier this year

Mahrez has since returned to the fold, and Petkovic went to see him in Saudi Arabia, where he stars for Al Ahli.

"Riyad Mahrez is a player who has done so much for Algeria, he demands respect," said the manager after that meeting. "He's important for the team and for me. He can still bring so much to us on the pitch but also off it, helping the younger players."

Algeria started their qualification journey for the 2025 Cup of Nations in September with victories over Equatorial Guinea and Liberia, and this might mark the turnaround that Petkovic is trying to steer.

The 33-year-old Mahrez played the first game and, while he missed an early penalty, showed he still has a role to play. But whether he will still be around in December 2025, when the next Cup of Nations finals kick-off in Morocco, remains to be seen.

Appointment... Petkovic's unveiling by the Algerian Football Federation in March

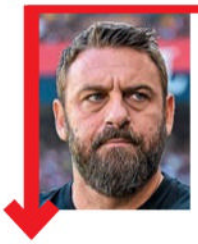
Petkovic has made it clear that a place in the team will only be reserved for those players displaying consistent performances with their clubs, meaning reputation is no longer a guarantee of a place. Belmadi's loyalty to players in his selection policy was likely a major contribution to his downfall, and his successor has said that he wants increased competition for places.

Algeria are always hunting prospective new players for their side and with that in mind Lyon's Rayan Cherki, French Olympic silver medallist Maghnes Akliouche and Hertha Berlin's Germany Under-18 international striker Ibrahim Maza have all been heavily courted to switch allegiance.

"The Algerian fans have high expectations, and so do I," Petkovic said. "My first goal is to build a positive and unified group that is eager to represent the national team.

"We've got a lot of work to do because we want to build a strong team that can perform well and achieve positive results for Algerian fans."

Mark Gleeson



Roma

Sacking of club legend Daniele De Rossi sparks chaos in the Italian capital

Roma took the Italian football world, including many of their own fans, by surprise when they sacked their coach and much loved club icon Daniele De Rossi in mid-September, just four games into the new Serie A season.

In theory, 41-year-old De Rossi was sacked because of the club's relatively disastrous start, drawing three games and losing the other at home to Empoli. Media speculation and sources close to the club, however, claim that De Rossi's sacking also owes something to the role of club CEO, Lina Souloukou, formerly CEO with top Greek club Olympiacos and a close advisor to the owning Friedkin family.

Adding intrigue to the story is the fact that, just a few days after the sacking of De Rossi, Souloukou herself resigned. Roma ultras were so outraged with her alleged role in the decision to fire De Rossi that she became the target of fan wrath, so much so that she and her family were placed under police escort.

Those tensions in themselves may well have been enough to prompt her departure. Yet many Roma fans remain convinced that in her role as advisor to Californian-born billionaire Dan Friedkin and his son Ryan, Souloukou was never really on De Rossi's side.

De Rossi, of course, was appointed last January to replace another iconic figure, Jose Mourinho. His young coaching career, which included just a few miserable winter months with Serie B side SPAL in 2022-23, did not promise much. He was seen by many as a stop-gap temporary measure, one of the club's greatest-ever players whose status, comparable to that of legendary former captain Francesco Totti, would keep the fans happy. Yet he did spectacularly well, winning ten of his first 11 games in charge, eventually finishing sixth in Serie A and qualifying for the Europa League. The *Curva Sud* – the south stand of Roma's Stadio Olimpico where the diehard fans gather – began to think their hero might be in it for the long haul.

This season then, even despite the poor start, many could not believe it when he was fired. The online site of Rome daily *Il Tempo*, however, claims that the Friedkin family was not fully informed about the situation, as their advisors failed to point out that De Rossi still had the full confidence of the majority of his first-team squad.

Sacked...former Roma head coach Daniele De Rossi

Whatever the truth, De Rossi was dismissed and replaced by 49-year-old Croatian Ivan Juric, a highly successful coach of Genoa, Verona and Torino over the last seven seasons.

His first game in charge, at home to then-league leaders Udinese, was a surreal, dramatic affair in which his side, or rather the club ownership, was whistled and jeered despite a 3-0 win. Fans in the *Curva Sud* had chosen to mark their disapproval of the sacking of De Rossi by not taking their places for the first half-hour, by which time Roma were already 1-0 up.

> The club ownership was whistled and jeered despite a 3-0 win. Fans in the *Curva Sud* had chosen to mark their disapproval of the sacking of De Rossi

Replacement... new boss Ivan Juric during his first game in charge of Roma

Juric went on to win his second league game, beating Venezia 2-1, while his first two Europa League games yielded a 1-1 home draw with Athletic Club and a surprise 1-0 away defeat by Swedish club, IF Elfsborg.

In a further twist, some media outlets have reported since that De Rossi could be set for a shock return, while others say the club are still evaluating Juric's progress. Either way, questions remain. Will the club be able to steady the ship following their unexpectedly stormy seasonal start? Have the Friedkins been distracted by their prospective purchase of historic Premier League club, Everton? Only time will tell.

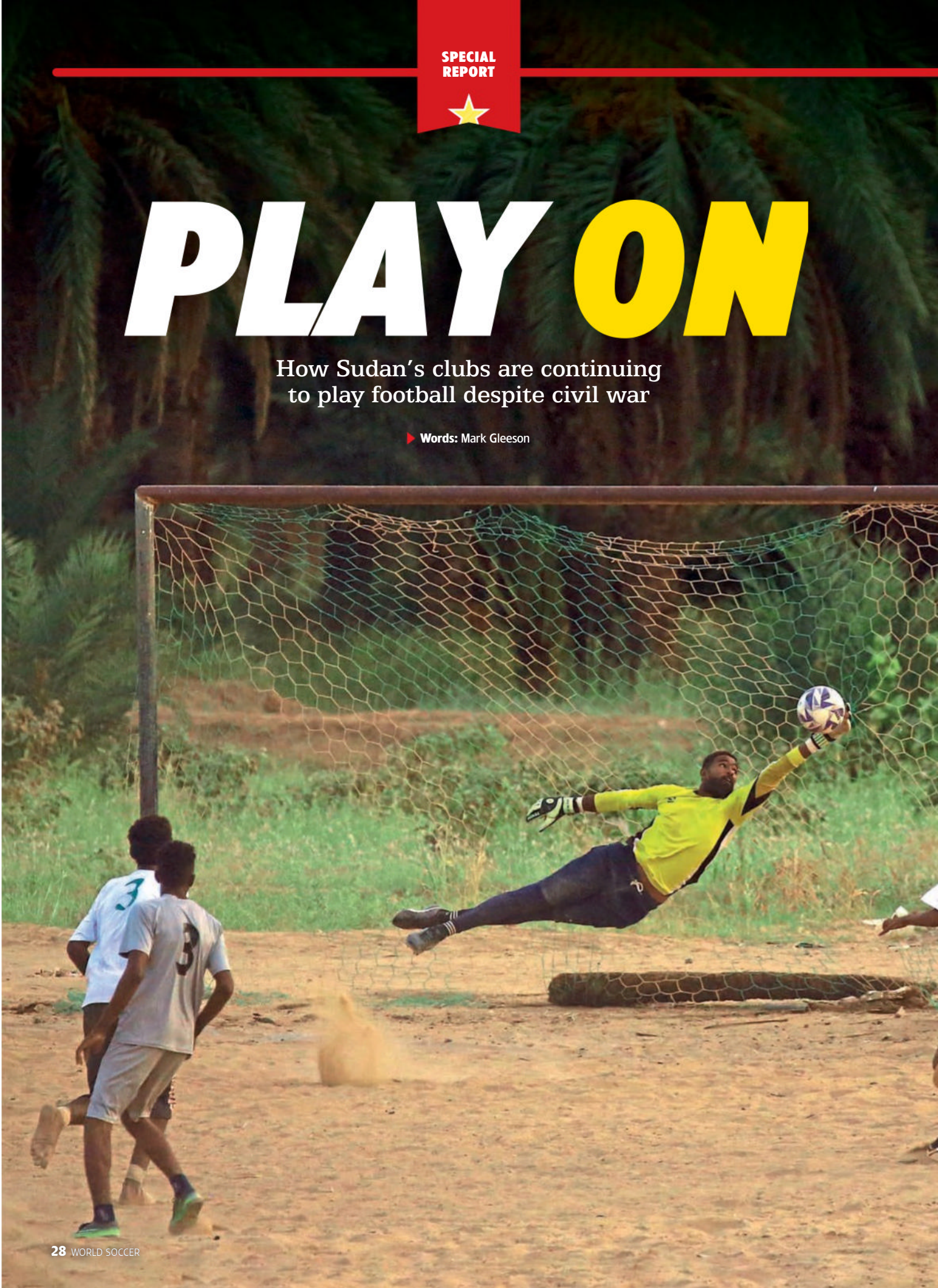
Paddy Agnew

SPECIAL REPORT

PLAY ON

How Sudan's clubs are continuing to play football despite civil war

Words: Mark Gleeson



Amid a civil conflict that has been described as the most brutal war in decades, Sudanese football is fighting hard to not only keep going but also achieve against all odds.

The brutal war that broke out in mid-April 2023 between Sudan's army and the paramilitary Rapid Response Forces has devastated the capital Khartoum, caused a sharp increase in ethnically-driven violence in Darfur and displaced over three million people.

It has also left sporting infrastructure in tatters and football in the country has ground to a halt. The last competitive matches in the Sudanese league were played in March last year.

But the country's top two clubs, Al Hilal and Al Merreikh, who have one of African sports' most intense rivalries, have looked to keep playing, taking their entire infrastructures into exile.

In September this year, they began participating in the league in Mauritania, some 4,500km away from the eastern side of the continent to its west coast, offered the opportunity to join in another country's championship. On top of this, Al Hilal have qualified for the group phase of this season's African Champions League and will again be chasing continental glory. They are no stranger to participating in the business end of the Champions League, although they've got no further than the group stage in the past five seasons.

But this time it is more symbolic – and poignant – as they will provide a welcome distraction for a country in dire need of some good news.

Al Hilal advanced through the two preliminary rounds of this season's Champions League to book a place in the group stage, first eliminating Libya's Al Ahli Benghazi and then San Pedro from the Ivory Coast. Unable to play at their home in Omdurman, a city on the other side of the River Nile from Khartoum, they used Juba in South Sudan for their home leg in the first round, then in the second round they played in the stadium in their new base of Nouakchott, Mauritania's capital, which will also be their home for the group competition.

Al Merreikh also had Libyan opposition in the first round and edged past Al Nasr, before having their hopes of returning to the group competition ended by losing to Royal Armed Forces (AS FAR) of Morocco in the second round.

The two clubs are massive institutions in Sudan, and between them have won the championship every year since 1969 bar two occasions. Al Hilal have a total of 30 titles, while Al Merreikh have won the league 23 times during that run.

Between the two, they have for decades provided almost all the players for the national team and been prolific importers of talent from elsewhere, notably Brazilian players and coaches and a keen eye for striking talent from Ghana and Nigeria.

The clubs are relatively rich by African standards, boosted by a fanatical following that ensures their profitability. It is this that has allowed them to move en mass from the conflict and keep going.

Sudan Football Association president Mutasim Jaafar has been widely applauded for his efforts to keep football going. He lobbied the Confederation of African Football (CAF) to allow Sudanese teams to continue participating in the annual club competitions despite the absence of a domestic league.

CAF regulations do not allow a country to enter teams in either the Champions League or Confederation Cup without any domestic competition, so a mini-tournament for Sudanese clubs in exile was organised in Tanzania with Al Hilal, Al Merreikh and Hay Al Wadi participating in Dar-es-Salaam. Originally it was hoped there would be more clubs, but the war made that impossible. Predictably, Al Hilal and Al Merreikh won over Hay Al Wadi and were supposed to play against each other in a deciding tie but this was called off.

The three-way tournament might have been a flimsy alternative to a proper domestic championship, but in the circumstances CAF allowed the two clubs to participate in the 2024-25 Champions League. There were no Sudanese clubs, however, in the African Confederation Cup where the country is also allowed two representatives.

"They know how important it is to bring some joy to the Sudanese people"

Portuguese coach Fabio Nuno, who worked at Al Hilal as an assistant to compatriot Joao Mota two seasons ago, says the potential for the club to overachieve in this season's Champions League is real, even if they are in exile.

Civil war...smoke blooms from Khartoum airport after fighting broke out in April 2023

"I think they will be super motivated because they know how important it is for Al Hilal to bring some joy to the Sudanese people," he says. "They are the only representatives left for Sudan, in any forum, never mind sport, not only in Africa but also throughout the whole Arabic speaking world. It is no normal club, very different. A proper institution.

"With the language barrier when we worked there we missed a lot of subtleties around the club, but I had a sense from the moment I arrived in Khartoum that this is a club of different dimensions, with a meaning and a legacy far beyond what ordinary clubs offer.

Passionate fanbase... Al Hilal supporters outside the club's stadium after holding Egyptian giants Al Ahly to a 0-0 draw

"In my 18 months there, you could sense the players and administrators went through a lot of turmoil in their everyday lives, making a lot of sacrifices, but ensuring that the team were able to achieve was always a priority and the players who wore the shirt realised this responsibility. You don't see that in many other places."

There is also the theory that going into exile has made for better teams.

"The two clubs have camped for more than a year now outside of the country. Al Merreikh were initially in Cairo for four months, Al Hilal in Libya and Tanzania, and they play a lot of matches," explains Abdelmoneim Hussein, a former Sudan international and ex-technical director of CAF. "You might not believe this, but they are better than they were when they were competing in the league in Sudan. The quality of opponents in all those friendly matches they have played to keep themselves going has been better and actually made them stronger.

"The coaches have the players all the time to work with and, with this concentrated period together, it has

Ray of hope...Sudan's women took on South Sudan in a friendly in February 2022

also helped them play better."

The two clubs had been seeking to join the Tanzanian league on a temporary basis but after initial overtures had met with a positive response, the concept was eventually rejected.

Mauritania Football Federation president Ahmed Yahya then made the offer to take in the pair to his country's league instead after consulting with all the teams in the Super League, who all agreed to the new competition. The duo are likely to be much stronger than almost all the clubs in their new host country's league, as Al Hilal's opening game in September against Inter Nouakchott, an easy 4-1 win, suggested.

Their squad is still packed with imports, notably from the Ivory Coast and Senegal, and coach Florent Ibenge from the Democratic Republic of Congo has stayed with the team.

He had to flee when the conflict broke out as his house was close to the presidential palace, one of the first targets of the rebel forces. It took a week to be evacuated by the French embassy. His players had been camping at a compound in the stadium after playing a match when the fighting broke out and so were together as they made their effort to flee. It was easier for the foreign players who got international assistance but it took time for the Sudanese to get to Cairo where the team re-assembled.

"I tell the players they're capable of qualifying for the World Cup"

Sudan's national teams have also been severely affected by the conflict. The men last played a home match in March 2023 at the Al Hilal Stadium in Omdurman. Since then, they have "hosted" matches in Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Libya and lastly South Sudan.

But even with the nomadic existence, and absence of fan support, Sudan top their World Cup qualifying group with three wins from four matches and sit two points ahead of Senegal. They still have six matches to play – two of them against Sadio Mane and Co. – so it is too early to begin speculating about a fairy-tale qualification for the 2026 finals in North America, but it is a possibility as long as Al Hilal and Al Merreikh continue to play regularly, and so the arrangement with Mauritania has come as a major boost.

> Players had been camping at a compound in the stadium after a match when the fighting broke out and so were together as they made their effort to flee

Sudan appointed James Kwesi Appiah, who took his native Ghana to the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, as their coach in September last year and he made a positive impact immediately.

The 64-year-old does not want to tempt fate but says: "I tell the players that I firmly believe they're capable of qualifying for the World Cup. That pushes them to fight in every game. The Sudanese federation is also doing a remarkable job, providing excellent conditions for us. Everyone is contributing to the success of this qualifying campaign."

For the women's team, there is less optimism. Indeed, they had already ceased playing before the war began in April 2023.

Sudan has seen more coup attempts than any other country in Africa, and in October 2021 another takeover derailed women's football almost as soon as it had begun in the East African nation.

Prior to 2019, sport for women was outlawed by the country's repressive public order laws, but when those were abolished, a women's football league quickly sprung up. In August 2021, the national team played their first-ever game, competing in the Arab Women's Cup. They lost all three games, conceding 27 goals in the process, but just getting onto the pitch – and scoring their first-ever goal in a 12-1 defeat by Tunisia – was a significant achievement.

Their next fixture was a Women's Africa Cup of Nations (WAFCON) qualifier in Algeria that they lost 14-0. Five days later, the coup began and the return fixture never took place. The league was suspended, and they haven't played a competitive game since. A pair of friendlies against South Sudan Khartoum in February 2022 offered a ray of hope, but that was soon extinguished amidst more violence.

eyewitness

Fred Dodgson reports

ENGLAND

Football fan friendships

The supporter alliances that stretch across Europe

In the Three Lions pub on South Bristol's West Street, there is no place for decorative subtlety. To glance around the room is to be affronted by a bright and bursting exhibition of Bristol City fan culture. Wallpaper is made entirely from historic newspaper headlines and the grinning faces of club legends. Memorabilia and City-based art hangs from ceilings and clings to walls. From the pub's raised garden, the Robins' Ashton Gate stadium is the centre point of the view, standing tall against a backdrop of rolling West Country hills.

It is a pub with a partisan reputation, and for good reason. Positioned above the door is a boastful display of an old Millwall team bus sign, proudly snatched from the East Londoners during the heyday of football hooliganism and kept for the next 20+ years. Outside, the entrance is swamped with Bristol City flags and signs. The visit of Manchester City in the FA Cup two years ago saw the establishment erect a giant banner that kindly read: "Welcome to Bristol. You cheating *****!" For away contingents hoping to catch a pre-game pint around Ashton Gate, the Three Lions is not the go-to choice.

Yet on this day, for a pre-season tie against newly promoted Eredivisie outfit Willem II Tilburg, things are different. Since 10am, "opposition" fans have gathered to mingle, drink and sing together. Unusually, the Three Lions is now playing host to an all-day party thrown for the sole purpose of supporter integration. Less than a mile away, the Miners Arms – where away fans are just as rarely spotted – is preparing for an evening of hard Dutch techno. These are events intended ▸

In unison...Bristol City and Willem II's fan friendship
Credit: Bristol City FC

Pre-match...City and Willem II fans gather for the walk to Ashton Gate
Credit: Bristol City FC

to mark a culmination of 15 years of unlikely friendship between fans of Bristol City and Willem II, with a long awaited friendly fixture at City's 137-year-old stadium the headline attraction.

For both sets of supporters, revelling in each other's company in the build-up to 3pm, there is a sense of occasion heightened far beyond your average pre-season kickabout. Outside the Three Lions, smoke bombs have given red tincture to the air as a peculiar cocktail of Bristolian and Dutch accents chant in companionship: "Bristol, Tilburg, Bristol, Tilburg!"

"We are here for the friendship," explains Bim, one of a 600-strong following from Tilburg and host of Willem II's fan-led *De Korvelse Kant* (The Korvel Side, a reference to a section of the Dutch club's ground) podcast. "It has been so long, we have all been longing for this day and it has finally happened. We needed to be here."

Another Willem II supporter, Lucas, has had a testing journey, with flight cancellations forcing a five-hour detour via Aberdeen, but insists that he "simply had to make it".

"We have a connection together for a long time and it is the first time we have met, so we came the long way round – but we are here!"

The origins of the relationship, it becomes clear, are murky, and when quizzed fans have differing answers that seem to bend into the mythical. Bim declares that the bond was forged in battle, when Bristol City fans partying in Tilburg were "helped out" by locals after finding themselves in a spot of trouble with a violent element of Willem's arch-rivals, FC Groningen. Lucas suggests that two travelling fans from either side became friendly through a chance meeting at the Tour de France, and group visitations grew from there.

> "We are here for the friendship. It has been so long, we have all been longing for this day and it has finally happened. We needed to be here"

What appears to be the accepted origin story, however, is revealed by City fan Robert who, like hundreds around him, is donning a commemorative T-shirt featuring a version of both cities' coats of arms. "It began when a chap from their [Willem] side visited in 2008 and was taken to a City game by Scooter, who was a bit of a legend in our fanbase. Then a group of about 30 City fans went over in return, and kept going back. I think it's just sort of snowballed from that".

Since then, both sets of supporters have been common features in each other's home and away ends, most notably when Willem II bolstered City's numbers at Sunderland's Stadium of Light in April. In 2014, Willem fans revealed a large banner at their Koning Willem II Stadion paying respect to a Bristol City fan who had passed away from cancer. The following year, for Bristol City's Johnstone's Paint Trophy victory at Wembley, around 200 of the crowd in attendance were said to have come from Tilburg as the bond continued to strengthen. Whatever the origins of the friendship, its first official meeting shows it to have grown into something spectacular.

It is far from a unique case,

Willem II support...the away end at Ashton Gate
Credit: Bristol City FC

especially in German football where *Fanfreundschaft* (fan friendship) is common. A week earlier, Ipswich Town hosted Fortuna Dusseldorf at Portman Road 18 years after fan group Fortuna Blue forged a connection between the clubs. Supporters have been making the 300-mile trip between Dusseldorf and East Anglia ever since, and similar journeys have been made by fans of Leicester City and VfL Bochum since around 2008. Likewise, Bayer Leverkusen fans are a regular and vocal presence at Brighton, especially for the Seagulls' matches with rivals Crystal Palace, and when Leverkusen were crowned Bundesliga champions in April a large banner congratulating them was unveiled at the Amex.

Perhaps the oldest *Fanfreundschaft* is between Hamburg SV and Rangers, which dates back to a friendly between the two in the 1970s. The German fans were so impressed by the atmosphere

BELOW LEFT: City v Willem...the commemorative pennant for the friendly fixture
Credit: Bristol City FC
BELOW: The Three Lions...usually Bristol's most partisan pub

generated by the visitors that they formed the Hamburg Loyal Rangers Supporters Club, which still exists today.

In each case, there are shared characteristics or histories between the clubs that help strengthen the ties. Ipswich and Fortuna are kindred spirits, as teams that enjoyed forays into European football in the 1970s and 1980s and have tended to bounce between the first and second (and occasionally third) tiers since; Leicester and Bochum both play in blue and white and have generally occupied similar positions in their countries' footballing hierarchies as the record winners of the English and German second tiers respectively (with four 2. Bundesliga titles, Bochum share that honour with three other clubs), while Brighton and Leverkusen's friendship stretches back to the 1990s when fans of the German club donated to the Seagulls' rescue fund. In the case of Rangers and Hamburg, both are from port cities with similar histories of shipbuilding that they happen to share with fierce local rivals of different political outlooks; it is no coincidence that their alliance has been mirrored by one between Celtic and St Pauli (albeit that has cooled recently) and that sense of teaming up against joint rivals has undoubtedly strengthened bonds.

Ultimately though, these *Fanfreundschafts* are sustained by the goodwill, enthusiasm and curiosity of intrepid fans seeking a footballing city break.

Other cross-border partnerships go deeper. For some it is historic: Juventus, for instance, famously took their black and white shirts from Notts County and in 2011 marked the opening of their new stadium with a friendly against the Magpies. Similarly, Athletic Club have played in red and white stripes ever since one of their players brought a crate of Southampton kits back to Bilbao from England in 1910. A more profound link between the two cities was formed during the 1930s, when Southampton provided a haven for over 3,000 Basque refugees – almost all children – from the Spanish Civil War.

These friendships are sustained by the goodwill, enthusiasm and curiosity of intrepid fans seeking a footballing city break

For others, allegiances are formed along political or religious lines. The prominence of the orthodox Christian church in Russia, Serbia and Greece helps to explain the link between fan groups of Spartak Moscow, Red Star Belgrade and Olympiacos. Again, there are broad similarities – capital city sides that regard themselves as working class – but it is sustained by the supporters that travel in numbers to visit their partners abroad, leaving their mark by exchanging flags and painting murals. And, as with the Glasgow-Hamburg connection, the partnerships are mirrored by their respective rivals: CSKA Moscow, Partizan Belgrade and PAOK share a similar bond.

The fanbase that is perhaps most vocal in its alliances with others is of AEK Athens, a club founded by and for refugees in the Greek capital 100 years ago. Their biggest supporter group, Original 21, is committed to left-wing politics that preaches anti-fascist and anti-racist messages in line with the club's origins. They have forged connections with likeminded supporters across Europe, but most strongly with Marseille.

The French city was founded some 2,600 years ago by Greek settlers

Fortuna Blues...flags of Fortuna Dusseldorf and Ipswich Town inside Portman Road
Credit: Ipswich Town

Red and white alliance...fans of Red Star Belgrade and Olympiacos march together ahead of their Champions League clash in 2019

from Phocaea, and the club's Olympique suffix and nickname, "The Phocaeans", are both references to their Hellenic origins, so a link to Greece already existed when OM faced AEK in the European Cup in October 1989. Visits, flags and banners have been exchanged ever since, meaning that last season's Europa League meeting between the two was a celebration in the stands as much as it was a rivalry on the pitch.

Back in Bristol, the atmosphere is less explosive but enthusiastic nevertheless. Kick-off is still an hour-and-a-half away when a mixed group of around 2,000 supporters begin a march from the Three Lions to the stadium, lighting up residential streets with colour and song. Ultras groups from both sides lead the march and a hand painted *tifo* reading: "friendship for life"' is held aloft at the front.

"This day does mean everything," says Tom, a Bristol City season ticket holder. "We've asked for this for a while and we're showing that football fans can get along," he says, pointing to the congregation of joyous fans now engaged in a vibrant display opposite the stadium.

Inside Ashton Gate, the atmosphere is lit up by camaraderie. Kick-off sees the two fanbases bounce in unison while more enormous banners and surfer flags pronouncing friendship are unveiled.

The game itself provides little to write home about. Willem II, ahead of a return to the Eredivisie after a two-year absence, are resolute and solid, while City, entering their tenth successive season in the Championship, spend the game probing with intent but little reward. The match ends in a competitive goalless draw, but is largely irrelevant in the context of the day.

As the 90-minute mark approaches, the football begins to feel a little in the way of the party. At full-time, fans – mostly segregated during the game, albeit with some City fans ending up in the away end – are quickly reunited in spaces around the stadium.

Bim, speaking from the Miners Arms after-party as Dutch techno booms into the golden Bristol dusk, reflects on the day with bursting enthusiasm: "It has been absolutely brilliant. The atmosphere around here has been so friendly, it has all been positive. We have felt so welcome".

Original 21...a *tifo* honouring the friendship between AEK Athens and Marseille inside the Stade Velodrome

Football carries a fan culture built around tribalism. Partisan by nature, fuelled by segregation. It is that, in part, that can make atmospheres all the more thrilling and enticing; football's edge, for better or worse, is one of its strongest selling points. This means, however, that on the rare occasions when bonds between two would-be "rivals" manage to blossom, it is all the more meaningful. The ongoing fellowships that exist across Europe prove that, sometimes, football fans can be friends.

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17

WILLIAMS THE YOUNGER

Just like big brother Inaki, Nico Williams has lit up Bilbao's San Mames. What's next for the Spanish European champion?

Words: Nick Bidwell

For any pro footballer, the unconditional backing of his team-mates is a priceless asset. Just ask young Athletic Club and Spain winger Nico Williams, who after his dazzling contribution to *La Roja's* recent triumph at Euro 2024 – notably his goalscoring Player-of-the-Match performance in the final against England – ultimately chose to stay with Athletic rather than move to Barcelona, the Premier League or Paris Saint-Germain.

The 22-year-old Williams, born in the northern town of Pamplona to Ghanaian immigrant parents and on Athletic's books since the age of 11, knows all about the principles of solidarity and commitment that underpin the Basque club, and would not have been surprised by his Athletic and Spain colleague Unai Simon delivering an impassioned off-season plea for the Iberian media to tone down the transfer feeding frenzy.

"It's been a very complicated time for Nico," declared the goalkeeper. "To be the subject of round the clock news reports, to read things that even he was not aware of and that were 90 per cent invented. That's not easy to put up with. His only fault is to be one of the best wingers in Europe and the best winger at Euro 2024 along with Lamine [Yamal]. He hasn't deserved the pressure that has come his way. He's only 22 and already has earned the respect of the Athletic Bilbao and Spanish national team dressing rooms. That is incredible.

"After the highly successful season he has just experienced [winning both the European Championship with Spain and the Copa del Rey at club level], the only advice I can give him is to enjoy his holidays with his family and friends and to return to us with his batteries recharged. No one here is going to say anything to him about the decision he makes. Impossible. We'll be happy whatever he chooses."

Much to the relief of Simon and the entire Athletic fanbase, Williams opted, a couple of weeks later, not to pack his bags. Currently under contract until 2027, he is unlikely to remain in Bilbao beyond next summer, but at least the wolves have been kept at bay for now. Another campaign of Williams flank magic should please everyone at the San Mames and, if truth be known, Athletic have already done exceedingly well to retain him through three consecutive transfer windows.

He had several good reasons for embracing the status quo. First and foremost, Bilbao is his domain, the place where the boy became a man. Carefully nurtured at the Lezama academy before making his senior debut three years ago, he regards Athletic as much more than a soccer school or first-team stage. Since arriving from Osasuna in 2011, the club has been his second family.

Equally important are Nico's blood ties at Athletic. His elder brother Inaki, eight years his senior, is also a star name there, with the two siblings operating on opposing flanks. An Athletic first-teamer for the last eight years, Inaki has enjoyed a tremendous career in his own right, closing in on 450 official outings for the Lions, with over 100 goals in the bank and good enough to have once sparked the interest of Liverpool and Manchester United.

The two brothers are extremely close and Nico very much remains in awe of his big brother, regarding the latter as a sporting-role-model-cum-third-parent. "Inaki became like a father to me when my dad had to go to England to look for work," declared Nico on the CBS Sports podcast *Que Golazo* in March 2022. "My brother would take me and pick me up from school, a lot of the things fathers do. I'm very grateful to my brother, the kind person that he is."

Barcelona daily *Sport* recently ran with the story that Nico's continued loyalty to Athletic was linked to a vow he made to his brother, promising to hold the line for one more season, thus making himself available for the club's 2024-25 Europa League campaign, the club's first continental foray in six years.

The Williams siblings have never played together in a UEFA club competition and their dream is to help Athletic claim their first-ever continental European trophy.

Brotherly love...Nico and Inaki celebrate after the latter's goal against Barcelona in last season's Copa del Rey quarter-finals

The fact that this season's Europa League final is to be held in Bilbao only adds greater piquancy to the chase. "Who knows what will happen in the future, but I wanted to stay here because playing in Europe with Athletic is what I'm most excited about," Nico told *DAZN*.

Nico will be keeping his fingers crossed that his final chapter with Athletic will be a carbon copy of his professional debut for the club, a moment bathed in joy and shared with his brother. At the beginning of the game in question, a 2-2 draw at the San Mames against Real Valladolid in April 2021, the Williams duo were both on the bench. On the hour mark, Nico, then 18, came on for Jon Morcillo. Ten minutes later, Inaki entered the fray to complete the brothers in arms vibe.

It was the first time in 35 years that two siblings had played together for the Lions in the same fixture, emulating the feat of Julio and Patxi Salinas, who featured against Atletico Madrid back in the spring of 1986. "It was a thrill for my brother, for me and for our whole family," said Nico

First top-flight win...Williams celebrates the victory over Sevilla in May 2021

> "I wanted to stay here because playing in Europe with Athletic is what I'm most excited about"
>
> **Williams on committing his future to Athletic**

Copa winner... Williams with last season's Copa del Rey trophy

afterwards. "Hopefully I'll have much more time on the pitch with my brother."

Kith and kin is the cornerstone of the Williams model of existence. No sacrifice is too big in their quest to provide the best for their family, and this certainly was true in 1994 when the parents of the footballers-to-be, father Felix and mother Maria, took the momentous decision to quit their native Ghana and make tracks for the hoped-for better life in Europe.

Crossing the Sahara in blistering heat, part of the journey squashed in an overflowing open truck, part walking barefoot for days on end, was a perilous exercise indeed, rendered all the more difficult by a distinct lack of food and water and the fact that Maria was pregnant with Inaki. Not only did a gang rob them of their savings en route, Felix badly damaged the soles of his feet and still suffers with the fall-out today.

By hook and by crook, the pair eventually reached the Spanish enclave of Melilla in North Africa, where they were detained. Normally they would have been sent straight back, but taking the advice of legal counsel from a human rights charity, tore up their Ghanaian papers and instead put in a political asylum claim under the name of war-torn Liberia.

Family unit...Inaki and Nico pose for a photograph with their mother Maria

Their application was successful. Next stop: the Basque Country, first moving to Bilbao – where Inaki was born – then to Pamplona 150 kilometres to the south-east.

"They risked their lives so that we, my brother and I, could have a better future and they achieved that," said Nico of his parents in a BBC interview. "I will forever appreciate what my father and mother did for us. They are fighters. They instilled in us respect and hard work and the idea that nobody gifts you anything. Thanks to God, we are all here together now, living a really good life. My parents are able to watch their sons prosper, which is why they came here. Everything we do is for our parents. The truth is, I'm so proud to have them as parents and I try to do everything possible so that they have the same pride in me as a son."

Some have suggested that Luis Enrique, the coach who gave Nico his first full cap in a UEFA Nations League tie against Switzerland in September 2022, had been forced to bring the young winger on board by Inaki's decision a few months earlier to throw in his international lot with Ghana, a claim the former Spain boss denied.

"I'm not doing this to stop him going with Ghana; he's young and a very interesting player," said Enrique after the call-up. "I like him enormously."

It wouldn't take long for Nico to make his mark for *La Roja*. Thanks to three impressive substitute cameos for Luis Enrique's side – including his

Wing wizards...Williams and Lamine Yamal celebrate Spain's summer triumph beside the European Championship trophy

first goal for the national team in a friendly win over Jordan in November 2022 – he was duly selected for World Cup duty at Qatar 2022, where he made four appearances, three of them from the bench. For Spain, eliminated in the round of 16, it was a tournament to forget. But what a crucial educational platform for Nico, who, ironically, did not make a splash with Spain's Under-21 side, only making five appearances at that level, starting just once.

With Luis de la Fuente, taking over as Spain's coach from Luis Enrique late in 2022, the team's default possession-heavy playing style became more direct. With young wingers Williams and Yamal, De la Fuente had just the vibrant, imaginative operatives to make the system work. "We've clearly set out what we want to do," said Williams after earning the Player of the Match honours in a Euro 2024 group-stage victory against Italy, a game in which he brutally turned *Azzurri* full-back Giovanni Di Lorenzo inside out. "We aim to win the ball back early and then head for goal. We go vertical."

Early in Nico's international career, Luis

> "I'm not doing this to stop him going with Ghana; he's young and a very interesting player...I like him enormously"
>
> **Luis Enrique on calling up Williams for Spain in 2022**

Staying put... Williams in action against Atletico Madrid this season

Decisive...Williams scores v England in the Euro 2024 final

> If Nico's two goals at Euro 2024 are anything to go by, he can now put away chances with the best

Enrique often would be heard to say that the youngster still had much to lean about coming inside and finishing. But if Nico's two goals at Euro 2024 – skipping past a hapless Georgian defender in the round of 16 before emphatically firing home and netting the opener in the final against England with a low, precision drive – are anything to go by, he can now put away chances with the best.

It was not always thus. As he prepared in the summer of 2019 to make the switch from the Athletic youth team to the reserves, the general feeling at the club was that he urgently needed to boost his goal quotient, to add sharpness in front of goal to his remarkable array of other front-running gifts.

"I particularly remember a conversation I had with him in one of our first training sessions," recalled reserve team coach Joseba Etxeberria – once an outstanding forward with Athletic and Spain – to *Marca* in 2021. "I told him that with his pace and quality on the ball, he could not be satisfied with six goals a season for the youth team. In response, he argued that he wasn't a goalscorer. I answered that being a marksman was a state of mind and that he could acquire such a mindset here. To whet his appetite for goals, to make him more comfortable closer to goal, I picked him to be our penalty taker. He wasn't sure about it, he pointed out that he'd never taken them before. And it worked. He put away all the kicks he had.

"He was a youngster to make a difference attack-wise. He had two great feet, was outstanding in his ball control, he had endurance and intensity, a great engine and in addition to his speed, he knew when to accelerate and when to slow it down. He's much more intelligent than he's given credit for. You didn't usually have to repeat instructions to him and he was keen to work on his weaknesses. For example, with the reserves, he improved greatly on the tactical and defensive side of things. Above all, he really wanted to be a footballer. He'd listen to you with his eyes wide open and his ears pricked up. He had the necessary humility. He wanted to learn every day."

Desire plus limitless talent equals an extraordinary story of sporting and social integration. An example of African-Basque fusion to warm the heart.

Torn apart... Williams torments Italy's Giovanni Di Lorenzo at the Euros

Nico Williams

LA LIGA STATS & FACTS 2023-24 SEASON

10

SENT OFF

There were only ten seconds between Williams' first and second yellow cards for the only red card of his career: one for a foul, and another for dissent

3

PENALTIES WON

Williams won three penalties in La Liga last season, more than any other player

16

GOAL INVOLVEMENTS

Williams had a hand in more than a quarter of Athletic's La Liga goals in 2023-24 (26 per cent in total) with five goals and 11 assists

SPAIN

22

CAPS

GOALS

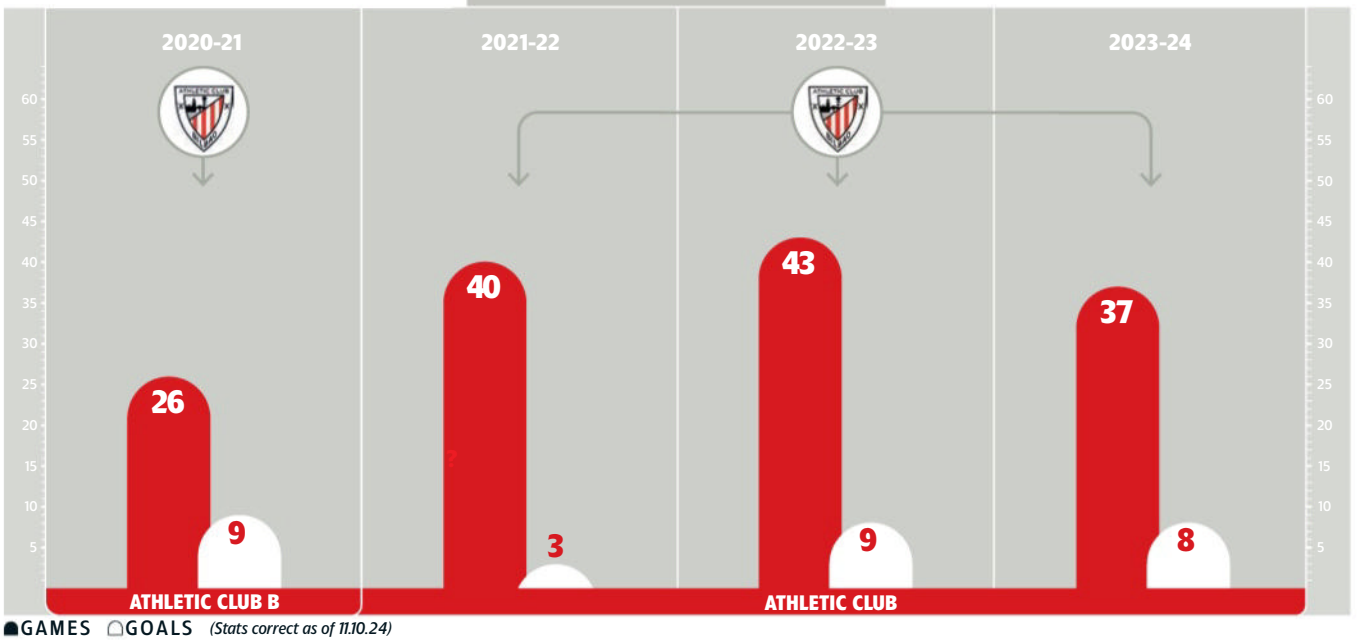
4

SUCCESSFUL DRIBBLES TOP FIVE LEAGUES 2023-24

124	**Mohammed KUDUS** *(West Ham United)*
104	**SAVINHO** *(Girona)*
102	**Matias SOULE** *(Frosinone)*
101	**Khvicha KVARATSKHELIA** *(Napoli)*
93	**Leroy SANE** *(Bayern Munich)*
90	**Edon ZHEGROVA** *(Lille)*
87	**Jamal MUSIALA** *(Bayern Munich)*
87	**Jeremy DOKU** *(Manchester City)*
86	**Nico WILLIAMS** *(Athletic Club)*
84	**Xavi SIMONS** *(RB Leipzig)*

LA LIGA BROTHERS' COMBINED APPEARANCES

1.	Julio & Patxi **SALINAS**	828
2.	Jesus & Enrique **CASTRO**	763
3.	Manolo, Antonio & Fernando **HIERRO**	686
4.	Luis & Aitor Lopez **REKARTE**	618
14.	**Inaki & Nico WILLIAMS**	**461**



GAMES GOALS *(Stats correct as of 11.10.24)*

6 of the best

Same family, different countries

Nico Williams and his brother Inaki aren't the only siblings to represent different countries at international level, as **Mark Gleeson** reveals...

1 Inaki & Nico WILLIAMS

GHANA & SPAIN

Forwards Inaki and Nico were both born in Spain and began their careers at Athletic Club's youth academy after their parents had made the perilous journey from Ghana over the Sahara desert to claim refugee status in Europe.

Inaki made it into the Bilbao outfit's first team in 2014 and has been there ever since. Spain handed him a cap ahead of Euro 2016 but he missed out on the final squad and, having not got another call-up, switched international allegiance to Ghana who he represented at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

Nico is eight years younger and got his first cap for Spain just months after his brother had debuted for the Black Stars, before sparkling last summer and scoring in the final as *La Roja* won Euro 2024.

2 Taulant & Granit XHAKA

ALBANIA & SWITZERLAND

The Xhaka brothers were both born in Basel to ethnic Albanian parents who hailed from Kosovo. Both played together in the Swiss junior sides but while Granit made his full international debut in 2011, Taulant never graduated beyond the Under-21s and switched allegiance to Albania, debuting in 2014.

The two faced off at Euro 2016, where Granit put on a dominant performance as the Swiss won 1-0. "Not many have experienced something like this," said Granit of the game, which was watched by their mother in a T-shirt that had both countries' flags on it.

Granit has since gone on to captain Switzerland and become their most-capped player, while Taulant played 31 times for Albania before quitting international football in 2019.

3 Kevin-Prince & Jerome BOATENG

GHANA & GERMANY

Sibling rivalry has never had a more prestigious forum than the 2010 World Cup when half-brothers Jerome and Kevin-Prince Boateng lined up against each other. They had both been prodigies at Hertha Berlin but after Kevin-Prince, the older by 18 months, was left out of Germany's squad for the U21 Euros in 2019 he switched allegiance to Ghana, the country where their father had moved from in 1981.

Germany beat Ghana 1-0 in South Africa in 2010 although the Black Stars also went on to reach the quarter-finals. The brothers were on opposite sides again in the group phase at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil and played out an entertaining 2-2 draw.

4 Thiago & Rafinha ALCANTARA DO NASCIMENTO

SPAIN & BRAZIL

Mazinho (Iomar do Nascimento) was a World Cup winner with Brazil in 1994, but while Rafinha (Rafael Alcantara do Nascimento) followed in his father's footsteps by winning caps for *Selecao*, eldest son Thiago played 46 times for Spain between 2011 and 2021.

Thiago (Alcantara do Nascimento) could also have played for Italy, born there while his father was playing at Lecce. After beginning his career at junior level back in Brazil, he got a place in Barcelona's academy and from there was quickly chosen for Spain at junior level.

Rafinha also graduated from *La Masia* into Barcelona's first team but switched from Spain's youth-level set-up to Brazil and won Olympic gold in 2016.

5 Lys, Alfred & Maurice GOMIS

SENEGAL & GUINEA-BISSAU

The three goalkeeping Gomis brothers have all been to the AFCON finals – two of them in the colours of Senegal but the youngest for Guinea-Bissau.

Elder brother Lys Gomis was a back-up goalkeeper for Senegal at the 2015 tournament, and Alfred (pictured) played in the 2019 final, where they lost 1-0 to Algeria in Cairo. Alfred was born in Ziguinchor, Senegal, not far from the border with Guinea-Bissau, while Lys and Maurice were both born in Italy.

All three started in the Torino academy and Alfred was called up for the *Azzurri's* Under-20 side but never played before declaring for Senegal, who took him to the 2018 World Cup in Russia. Injury prematurely ended Lys' career, but Alfred played top-flight football in Italy and France while Maurice, who has played in Cyprus and Albania, chose the nationality of his mother to play for Guinea-Bissau, representing them at the 2021 AFCON finals.

6 Christian & Max VIERI

ITALY & AUSTRALIA

Christian and Max grew up in Australia after their father saw out his career Down Under before returning to Italy.

Christian won 49 Italy caps while on the books of Juventus, Atletico Madrid, Lazio, Inter and Milan, while Max played for Ancona, Verona and Napoli.

They might have met at the 2006 World Cup, when Italy beat Australia in the last 16, but Christian missed the finals through injury and Max won the last of his six Socceroos caps in 2005.

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AUCKLAND FC

In a new series, **Steve Menary** takes a closer look at teams under multi-club ownership models from around the world. This month, it's a brand new club from New Zealand competing in Australia's A-League…

Black Knight owner…Bill Foley speaks at a press conference announcing a new football club in Auckland

MCO FILES

Club: Auckland FC
Owners: Black Knight (82%)
MCO connections: Black Knight own a majority stake in English Premier League club Bournemouth, a 40 per cent stake in French Ligue 2 club Lorient, and 25 per cent of the shares in Scottish Premiership club Hibernian.
Player connections: New Zealand international goalkeeper Alex Paulsen was signed by Bournemouth in June 2024 from Wellington Phoenix, then sent immediately on loan to Auckland FC.

Full-time professional football in Auckland has an inauspicious past, but Auckland FC are hoping to change that with the club's entry into the A-League for the 2024-25 season.

Based in Auckland, the Football Kingz were New Zealand's first full-time professional football club and played in Australia's National Soccer League until being replaced by the New Zealand Knights when the A-League was founded in 2004.

The Knights were then dissolved in 2007 after finishing last two seasons in a row and were replaced in the A-League by Wellington Phoenix as New Zealand's only full-time club.

While Auckland City would go on to dominate New Zealand's part-time domestic football scene, New Zealand's biggest city – home to 1.7 million people – was left as the largest in Australasia without a professional football team until this year.

The seeds for the creation of Auckland FC came during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, when the A-League had to be bailed out with a A$140 million cash injection from Silver Lake. This gave the US private equity firm a 33.3 per cent stake in Australia's club soccer competitions.

As the virus receded into the distance, the A-League sought to expand to 14 clubs and two new franchises were offered up with

Auckland and Canberra the preferred destinations. While the Canberra franchise was finally put on hold in June 2024, six months earlier the franchise for Auckland was taken up by American businessman Bill Foley and his Black Knight consortium.

Like the Kingz, Auckland FC will play at Mount Smart Stadium. But that, the club's owners hope, will be the only link with the past as the new club embraces the world of multi-club ownership.

The Black Knight Football and Entertainment group owns English Premier League club Bournemouth and has stakes in two other European sides. At Auckland FC, the stake is reportedly 82 per cent alongside a number of minority investors including former New Zealand internationals Winston Reid, Tim Brown and Noah Hickey, plus ex-All Black Ali Williams and his wife, the entrepreneur Anna Mowbray. The Cherries operate with a similar structure, with film star Michael B. Jordan leading a minority ownership group in the south coast club.

The importance of multi-club ownership is reflected in the choice of chief operating officer. Nick Becker spent 11 years at the ultimate MCO, City Football Group, between 2011 and 2021. After a four-year spell as head of events at Premier League giants Manchester City, Becker returned south to join CFG's Australian subsidiary, Melbourne City, as marketing director in August 2015 and stayed until the end of 2022.

Steve Corica, who won 32 caps for Australia and played in England for Leicester City and Wolverhampton Wanderers, has been brought in as head coach. Though sometimes taciturn with the media, Corica won the A-League Premiership in 2019-20 and the Australia Cup in 2023 with Sydney FC.

Former Football Federation Australia general manager Doug Kors has been appointed as head of player recruitment and Terry McFlynn – previously operations manager at A-League franchise Perth Glory – has been installed as director of football.

Assembling a competitive squad from nowhere is not easy given the A-League's financial straits. The Australia Professional League (APL) made savage funding cuts in 2024, letting half of its staff go in January and axing the digital and content arm.

Auckland FC's home ...the Mount Smart Stadium is usually used for rugby

In a recent email to fans reported by *Fox Sports*, Central Coast Mariners owner Richard Peil wrote: "I don't quite know just yet exactly how it got to this point and where all the money has gone, but I'm committed to finding out and ensuring accountability is enforced. The state of the league unfortunately means that our club's distribution is likely to be reduced by over $1m for this upcoming season."

The APL, which split from Football Federation Australia in 2020, needs some good news but this is an inauspicious time to start a new franchise. The cost of the franchise to the Black Knight consortium has never been confirmed, but minimum expectations are put at A$20m.

The current A-League salary cap limit is $2.6m with minimum spending of $2.25m, which puts pressure on owners like Peil and Black Knight to cover the shortfall.

Auckland FC turned to Black Knight's constantly expanding MCO but ran into problems when trying to recruit Alex Paulsen. The former Wellington Phoenix goalkeeper had been signed by Black Knight's main club, Bournemouth, for a reported A$4m in June 2024 then loaned to Auckland FC.

This contravened an A-League rule from 2016 after Manchester City acquired midfielder Anthony Caceres, who was bought for A$300,000 by

Ex-All White...Winston Reid is one of three former New Zealand internationals to invest in the club

Manager...former Australia international Steve Corica will manage the club *Credit: Auckland FC*

the English club then sent to fellow CFG club Melbourne City in Australia on loan without playing a game. What became known as the Caceres Clause was introduced to prevent a repeat, with clubs in the same MCO not allowed to buy and loan back any player within two transfer windows.

The day that Paulsen was signed by Auckland FC, the A-League announced a review, and the clause will be phased out completely by 2025-26. In the short-term, clubs with common ownership were immediately allowed to engage in loans of two players.

Paulsen, who made his All Whites debut at the 2024 OFC Nations Cup, has been a high-profile signing for Auckland FC, as has veteran Japan defender Hiroki Sakai from Urawa Red Diamonds, but the owners are also trying to build a long-term future.

Like Wellington Phoenix, Auckland FC will field a reserve side in New Zealand's National League next season and a swathe of young local players – namely Liam Gillion, Oliver Middleton, Jonty Bidois, Luis Toomey, Finn McKenlay and Adama Coulibaly – have been signed on scholarships and over $70,000 in FIFA training compensation will go to Kiwi clubs for developing these players. "This is a way to give back to the grassroots clubs that have done so much to nurture these talents," says Becker.

New signing... goalkeeper Alex Paulsen was at Wellington Phoenix last season *Credit: Auckland FC*

> The biggest games are likely to be the all-Kiwi derbies against Wellington Phoenix, the first of which takes place on November 2

Marquee signings... Cameron Howieson (L) and Hiroki Sakai (R) both played in the last Club World Cup *Credit: Auckland FC*

It is that approach that helped persuade former All Whites captain Reid to invest. The 33-cap defender was born in Auckland and first kicked a ball in the city, but his football career only took off when he moved to Denmark at the age of ten. There he was spotted by Midtjylland and later joined West Ham United, making 176 Premier League appearances, but that route was not available to his former team-mates back in Auckland.

"How amazing it is for a parent, if you are driving your kids to football three or four times a week, [to] have

a pathway on your doorstep where there is a carrot at the end of it," he told the *New Zealand Herald* after confirming his participation in the project. "That will be the great bit, especially for Kiwis; there is something at the end of the tunnel."

The start of a new club in Auckland also created opportunities for Kiwi players wanting to come home, such as goalkeeper Michael Woud, who joined Sunderland in England in 2015 at the age of 16 and has since played in the Netherlands and Japan. Kiwi international winger Joe Champness, whose part-time rapping will add some profile, has also returned from Adanaspor in Turkey.

The A-League was an obvious source and Australians Scott Galloway and Jake Brimmer joined from Melbourne City, along with English defender Tommy Smith from Macarthur and Fijian central defender Dan Hall from champions Central Coast Mariners.

The advent of a second full-time club in New Zealand has attracted players from local semi-pro clubs such as Francis de Vries from Eastern Suburbs and Wellington Olympic striker Jesse Randall. Both are young players with a handful of caps for the All Whites.

The most high-profile local signing, though, has been experienced attacking midfielder Cameron Howieson, who had been with perennial domestic champions Auckland City since 2017 and was one of the new A-League franchise's first signings in May 2024.

Howieson has lifted the OFC Champions League title for the last three seasons with Auckland City and would have played in the first edition of FIFA's new Club World Cup – as would Sakai – but both have left that behind for the new venture. When that competition is kicking off in the US next summer, the focus of Becker and the Black Knight group will be more provincial.

Auckland FC kicked off their A-League campaign against Brisbane Roar, and on October 27 Corica will lead the team out against his old club Sydney FC. The biggest games are likely to be the all-Kiwi derbies against Wellington Phoenix, the first of which takes place on November 2. The season ends in May and, while qualification for the post-season play-offs would be a huge boost, the Black Knights' first aim will be to banish memories of the city's previous failures to become Auckland's biggest football club.

Facetoface

"We're not here to just make up the numbers"

NICK BECKER, AUCKLAND FC CEO

What are your ambitions for the club in their first season in the A-League?
"Auckland is one of the most multicultural cities in the world, and we want to create a team that the city can be really proud of, one that's deeply connected to Auckland. We're not here to just make up the numbers; we want to win. We want to embed ourselves in the community and do things in an authentic way."

How important is Auckland FC's position as part of a multi-club ownership portfolio to the club's future?
"We want to create pathways for local players to reach the big European leagues, including Bournemouth in the English Premier League."

How many season tickets is the club issuing and how many have been sold to date?
"We're working towards selling out the [22,500-seat] stadium. The excitement around the club is growing, and we're committed to delivering a top-quality experience for everyone who comes to support us."

Is there a quota of how many NZ players must be included in the squad?
"We wanted to bring as many Kiwi players into the team as possible, while also bringing in experienced visa and A-Leagues players, and we've succeeded. Out of our 25-man squad, 18 are from New Zealand, and 13 of those players are from Auckland. It's about giving local talent the opportunity to shine on a bigger stage."

WORLD CUP CALLING

A team of foreign-born stars and a South Korean coach are bidding to make history for Indonesia

Words: John Duerden

Usually by this stage of World Cup qualification, Indonesia are playing friendlies and planning for the next Southeast Asian Championship, a biennial big deal in the football-loving region of 650 million. This time, though, the *Merah Putih* (Red and White) are still in the hunt for a first place on the global stage since 1938 – when they appeared as Dutch East Indies – and are now talking of using the regional tournament for development purposes. How times have changed.

Until recently, the team was known across the rest of Asia as one of the continent's biggest underachievers. The popularity of the game in the country of 270 million is undoubted and attending a game at Jakarta's Gelora Bung Karno Stadium along with 80,000 red-clad fans is one of world football's great experiences. That passion, however, often attracted those who would use the game for their own ends.

Chaos at the top has often been reflected by chaos on the terraces. Fan violence has been a constant backdrop with, according to independent monitors, 78 deaths since 1994. That does not include the 135 supporters who were killed at the Kanjuruhan Stadium in East Java in October 2022 when police fired tear gas, causing a stampede. Then there was FIFA stripping the country of the Under-20 World Cup in 2023 – Indonesia's first-ever hosting of a global event – after the governor of Bali declared that the Israeli team was not welcome.

For the past year, though, the headlines have been positive. FIFA called in Indonesia as a late substitute to host the Under-17 World Cup last November after Peru was withdrawn. It went well. The current optimism, however, is mostly about events on the pitch and especially the national team: For the first time since there was such a thing, Indonesia have reached the third round of World Cup qualifying.

Fans around the continent got a first glimpse of a stronger Indonesia in January, when they qualified for the Asian Cup for the first time since 2004. Defeating Vietnam in the group stage was enough to send the team into the knockout stage for the first time ever; the subsequent 4-0 loss to Australia was more competitive than the scoreline suggested.

After a slow start in the second round of World Cup qualification, there were home and away wins against Vietnam which helped send Indonesia into the third round as one of the surviving 18 nations left chasing Asia's eight automatic spots in North America in 2026.

Those three defeats in quick succession were painful for Vietnam, a country that, along with Thailand, have been the top dogs in Southeast Asia for some time. Malaysia and Singapore have had their moments too, with all four winning the regional championship – known in the past as the Tiger Cup and then the AFF

Dreaming...Indonesia are hoping to qualify for the World Cup for the first time since 1938

Suzuki Cup – since its creation in 1996. Indonesia, despite reaching the final six times, have never lifted the trophy.

Now though, they are the region's sole representatives on the road to World Cup qualification. The third round is when the action really steps up a level, but the first two games in September saw Indonesia draw 1-1 in Saudi Arabia and then return home to draw 0-0 with Australia. Holding two Asian powerhouses to stalemates in the space of five days would simply not have been possible in the past.

The man overseeing this improvement in the national team's fortunes is Shin Tae-yong, who became head coach in 2020. He was once seen as the next big thing in Asian coaching after leading South Korea's Seongnam to the AFC Champions League in 2010 (when, immediately after, he announced that he was the "Asian Mourinho"). He then took charge of various South Korean national youth teams before getting the senior job in 2017 but, despite a famous 2-0 win over Germany, the 2018 World Cup was a disappointment and he moved on.

Naturalised...Justin Hubner is one of several Dutch-born players in the Indonesia squad

Shin seems to have found his happy place in Indonesia. "What's surprising is that when the game is over, you should call the names of the players who look good, but all the fans just call my name," said Shin in September. "It was amazing even for me to see it."

Firstly, he has placed trust in young players. Rizky Ridho, Pratama Arhan and Witan Sulaeman are all in their early 20s and all have over 40 caps each. Marselino Ferdinan, who has

Passionate fanbase... Indonesia's following is loud and large

just turned 20 and joined Oxford United in August, should have over 30 by the end of the year.

The draw with Saudi Arabia in Jeddah in September was an impressive display and, with a bit of better decision-making in the final third, Indonesia could have snatched the biggest win in their history. Another reason it ended all square was goalkeeper Maarten Paes, who made a number of good saves including one from the penalty spot.

It was a fine debut from the former Netherlands Under-21 goalkeeper, who was one of nine players in the starting XI born and raised in Europe. In a short period of time, Indonesia have embarked upon a policy of naturalisation of players, usually born and raised in the Netherlands – the European country colonised the archipelago for around 300 years until 1945 – with a parent or grandparent of Indonesian heritage. New players are being given passports all the time and Paes, who plays his club football in MLS for FC Dallas, is part of a 2024 influx that also includes Jay Idzes who plays for Venezia in Serie A. On September 30, PEC Zwolle winger Eliano Reijnders and FC Twente defender Mees Hilgers became the latest recruits.

In March, Vietnam international Do Duy Manh said that playing Indonesia was like playing the Netherlands. He may have a point but Marc Klok, also naturalised, hit back: "Maybe in the past few years, Vietnam have only played native Indonesians," he said. "Now they are scared after seeing how much Indonesia have changed."

Media in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City have been outspoken about the new influx into Team Garuda. It was seen as sour grapes in Jakarta, particularly after Brazilian forward Rafaelson received a Vietnamese passport in September. The former Vitoria striker will be known as Nguyen Xuan Son and is the first player to score more than 30 goals in a single V.League 1 season. There have been naturalised players in Vietnam before but none have appeared for the national team. It is likely that the South Korean coach in charge, Kim Sang-sik, will change that.

> In a short period of time, Indonesia have embarked upon a policy of naturalisation of players, usually born and raised in the Netherlands

If so, Kim may ask his compatriot Shin for advice. The policy in Jakarta was not without criticism, as pundits wondered whether naturalisation was being used as a shortcut to success, with investment in youth development and grassroots being neglected. Results, as they often do, have helped to reduce concerns. Now the 2026 World Cup is possible.

Indonesia's chances are still small but there is a chance. The expanded tournament means that Asia now has eight automatic spots instead of four. The 18 remaining teams are divided into three groups of six, with the top two from each qualifying automatically. Those that finish third and fourth will progress to an extra round to compete for two more places. With Japan, Saudi Arabia and Australia in the same group, it is unlikely that Indonesia will finish in the top two but finishing above China and Bahrain to take fourth is not out of the question.

Just getting close would be exciting; qualifying would be huge. The local league has not quite risen so spectacularly but, an outbreak of fighting in September apart, has settled down somewhat. World Cup qualification would bring in more money and much more besides. Erick Thohir, the head of the federation since 2023, is a successful football businessman, former owner of Internazionale and D.C. United, and rich in his own right. The tycoon, who served in the cabinet of just departed president Joko Widodo, has worked well with Shin and does not seem to be out for himself. A World Cup windfall now has much more chance of leading to improved facilities and investment than it would have done in the past.

It could lead to a virtuous cycle but even if it does not, fans in Indonesia are dreaming for the first time in a long time.

Oxford United new boy...Indonesia's Marselino Ferdinan

Shin Tae-yong...the coach celebrates with his players after reaching the third round of World Cup qualifying

'IT'S NOT ONLY ABOUT SIGNING THE STAR PLAYERS'

The head of Saudi Arabia's ambitious top flight sits down with *World Soccer* to discuss the league's future

Words: John Duerden

More than a year after the Saudi Pro League (SPL) became the talk of the football world for a summer spending spree of nearly £800 million, CEO Omar Mugharbel believes that the journey to be one of the top leagues in the world is very much on track.

There was a lot of talk over the 2024 summer window that everything was much quieter, but a late push involving the likes of Ivan Toney, Mohamed Simakan and Joao Cancelo took the spending just shy of £400m – half the amount from a year earlier but still a tidy sum.

"I think what we managed to do last season was to really open up the league and create an attractive proposition for star players," Mugharbel, who took the job in February, tells *World Soccer*. "We've seen that players have been very interested in actually having conversations about moving to the league and for the most part, most of the players that the clubs brought in are actually still in the league, which is a positive sign that things are moving in the right direction."

All 18 teams in the top tier are limited to signing ten foreign imports, of which only eight can be above 21. Some turnover of players is to be expected but, so far, Allan Saint-Maximin and Jordan Henderson are probably the biggest names to head off (to Fenerbahce and Ajax respectively). Karim Benzema, N'Golo Kante, Riyad Mahrez, Aymeric Laporte, Sadio Mane, Ruben Neves, Neymar and, of course, Cristiano Ronaldo, seem to be in no hurry to leave.

"This is a sign of stability," adds Mugharbel. "Our approach, which actually we've shared at the beginning of the window, was to continue with those contracts with the players and clubs and focus on filling the technical gaps that each club has. The players are connected with the teams and the community and are enjoying life and so are their families. We are keen on maintaining the players here and attracting more."

What the league definitely needs more of is match-going fans. Apart from the so-called "Big Four" – Al Hilal and Al Nassr in Riyadh and Al Ahli and Al Ittihad down in Jeddah – none of the other 14 teams' average attendance reached the 10,000 barrier. An average attendance of less than 9,000 was something of a disappointment, though it is not always easy for away fans to travel around the vast desert Kingdom without flying. Developments off the pitch have yet to catch up with the talent on it and, not long after arriving in Riyadh, Ronaldo talked of the need to improve the infrastructure. Last season Al Shabab, Ettifaq and Al Fateh opened new boutique stadiums and hosting the 2027 Asian Cup and the 2034 World Cup will result in an upgrade, while there are also moves to improve the whole match-going experience.

"Fan experience is a key element of it," says Mugharbel. "For example, it's very important that every fan has the ability at the click of a button to decide to go to watch a match – a couple of years ago we would have not dreamt of having that. There's still a lot for us to do and we're working towards improving all different aspects. We are focused on how we can support the clubs and help them have better engagement activities with their fans, because at the end of the day the league is an accumulation of the clubs.

"Where we have actually moved quite well is the storytelling of the league both on and off the pitch, because we look at that as a projection of what's really happening. We want to engage with our audiences, both domestically and internationally. We've worked and continue to work on making stadiums more accessible and more enjoyable for our fans.

"We're working with things like improving ticketing and now we're working on F&B [Food and Beverage]. But even all the different activities that happen around that, we've been working quite well in developing and supporting our clubs to improve how they operate on different levels, be it financial governance, commercial branding, marketing and administrative as well."

Back on the pitch, one potential issue is the preponderance of foreign players. With the recruitment restrictions placed on clubs, most tend to prioritise the creative and attacking spots for their expensive imports. There are also few local goalkeepers starting games – national team coach Roberto Mancini has complained about this more than once, though some believe the Italian is making excuses for mixed performances and results – yet Mugharbel insists that the foreign influx is ultimately good for domestic talent.

"We reduced the number of players for each team from 30 to 25," he says. "The key objective behind that was to make sure that players get a chance to develop and what we've seen so far in this transfer window is that a large number of those players have actually moved out of those clubs into other clubs, both in the Pro League but also down into the first division. By doing this, we give time for players that are talented. They not only train and go to camps with their teams, but now they have the opportunity to actually play games and that's a key area for their development. We don't see foreigners impacting this negatively. Actually, we see domestic talent improving within the clubs that do have foreigners."

> "Everybody in Saudi Arabia grew up playing football, everybody grew up watching football and it's deeply knitted into our culture"

Perhaps the example of Saud Abdulhamid would back this up. For a long time now, fellow Asian nations such as South Korea and, especially, Japan have sent their players to Europe in large numbers. Not only does this give more players international experience but gives younger talent at home more opportunities for first-team minutes.

Late arrival... Ivan Toney tackles Cristiano Ronaldo in a match between Al Ahli and Al Nassr

Exciting export... Saud Abdulhamid joined Roma from Al Hilal in the summer

Abdulhamid's summer move from Al Hilal to Roma is a big deal in more than one sense and the country hopes the pioneers can be a success.

"As a Saudi fan, I'm extremely proud to see a star player from our league play on the international stage and in Europe and in a reputable club," Mugharbel says. "As a league, obviously we're also very happy because it's a sign of the quality of the teams, the quality of the infrastructure, the quality of the players we have. And we hope this is just the start of many and we wish him luck in his new adventure."

Abdulhamid was one of the best players at Al Hilal, the best team in the league and, most would say, Asia. His departure is unlikely to affect the Blues too much as they signed Joao Cancelo from Manchester City who has already slotted in nicely. Last season Hilal strolled to the title, dropping just six points, and another procession would not be welcome.

"The beauty of football is that you never know who's going to win," says Mugharbel. "Every season is a completely different story. And when we look at our league today, you can't really foresee who is going to win some of the games because it's quite competitive."

The Big Four did not take the top four spots last time as Al Ittihad, with Benzema, Kante and former coach Nuno Espirito Santo, slipped into fifth. "The team in fourth was Al Taawoun which was great, a team with a lot of culture. Maybe it wasn't the favourite but this gives an indication that there is a fighting spirit in the league. There is a lot of competitiveness and we even see it this season so far."

Whatever happens, Ronaldo is going to be box office after scoring 35 league goals, a new record, in his first full season. Although he has still to win a major trophy with Al Nassr since arriving in December 2022, Mugharbel is sure that his legacy will be massive regardless.

Biggest summer signing...Al Ittihad star Moussa Diaby

"He has been very, very important. He was the first major signing to come to the league and paved the way for all the others. I grew up watching football. It was a dream for us to travel abroad and watch our favourite players play on the pitch. Fast-forward to where we are today, where you can go and see Ronaldo, it has been a massive transformation and I think the league has gained a lot of appeal. He was important from the start and continues to be important on and off the pitch."

He also made headlines for two bans imposed by the league. One was for an elbow and another was for an indecent gesture towards fans who had been chanting the name of his long-time rival Lionel Messi. "There are processes and different committees that oversee those things," says Mugharbel. "I think they dealt with the situations quite professionally and diligently."

Stars like Ronaldo ensure that the spotlight is never far away but it is one that the boss welcomes. "We definitely caught a lot of attention last summer and this continued throughout the season. We've actually been very keen and open about welcoming that attention because I think it's an opportunity for us to showcase all the great things that are happening within sports within the country and we're very proud of.

"It's not only about signing the star players, it's also about what we're doing from an infrastructure perspective and really improving the game. Everybody in Saudi Arabia grew up playing football, everybody grew up watching football and it's deeply knitted into our culture."

Abdulhamid's replacement...Joao Cancelo

SAUDI PRO LEAGUE ARRIVALS *Summer 2024*

Moussa **DIABY**	*(Aston Villa, Eng to Al Ittihad)*	**£50.5m**
Ivan **TONEY**	*(Brentford, Eng to Al Ahli)*	**£40m**
MARCOS LEONARDO	*(Benfica, Por to Al Hilal)*	**£33.2m**
Mohamed **SIMAKAN**	*(RB Leipzig, Ger to Al Nassr)*	**£37.9m**
Joao **CANCELO**	*(Manchester City, Eng to Al Hilal)*	**£21.1m**
ANGELO	*(Chelsea, Eng to Al Nassr)*	**£19.4m**
Steven **BERGWIJN**	*(Ajax, Ned to Al Ittihad)*	**£17.4m**
Ezequiel **FERNANDEZ**	*(Boca Juniors, Arg to Al Qadsiah)*	**£15.5m**
Julian **QUINONES**	*(America, Mex to Al Qadsiah)*	**£11.5m**
Gaston **ALVAREZ**	*(Getafe, Spa to Al Qadsiah)*	**£10m**
Houssem **AOUAR**	*(Roma, Ita to Al Ittihad)*	**£10m**
Pierre-Emerick **AUBAMEYANG**	*(Marseille, Fra to Al Qadsiah)*	**£7.5m**
JOAO COSTA	*(Roma, Ita to Ettifaq)*	**£7.5m**
DANILO	*(Paris Saint-Germain, Fra to Al Ittihad)*	**£4.2m**
Daniel **PODENCE**	*(Wolves, Eng to Al Shabab)*	**£4.2m**
Kurt **ZOUMA**	*(West Ham United, Eng to Al Orobah)*	**Loan**
Koen **CASTEELS**	*(Wolfsburg, Ger to Al Qadsiah)*	**Free**
NACHO	*(Real Madrid, Spa to Al Qadsiah)*	**Free**
Giacomo **BONAVENTURA**	*(Fiorentina, Ita to Al Shabab)*	**Free**
Chris **SMALLING**	*(Roma, Ita to Al Fayha)*	**Undisclosed**

LEE BOWYER

"I came into coaching because I want to improve players"

The ex-Premier League midfielder and former manager of Charlton Athletic and Birmingham City discusses his new venture as head coach of CONCACAF minnows Montserrat

After retiring from football, you initially had no intention of becoming a coach or a manager. Why did that change?
I couldn't understand where my reward was as a coach. You don't get the thrills you do as a player. But then a friend of mine, Harry Kewell, was an Under-21s coach at Watford and asked if I'd mind coming in and helping him. I was doing one-on-one finishing work with this striker. All of a sudden, he started scoring a lot of goals. His mum came over to me and said: 'Thanks for working with him. He really likes it and appreciates it.' I thought: 'Okay, so this is my reward. I'm passing on my knowledge and this lad is improving.' That's when it grabbed me.

You worked with a lot of talented young players at Charlton who have gone on to bigger things. Did any of them particularly impress you?
Joe Aribo was on the fringes of the first team and Karlan Grant was on loan at Crawley in League Two. Those two came through. We had Conor Gallagher on loan. He was one who stood out. You could tell he was going to be a good player; he just needed a little bit of guidance. We only had him until January; Swansea came and nicked him because he'd done so well. Ezri Konsa was like a Rolls Royce for us in League One. He could play anywhere – centre-half, right-back – I was playing him in sitting midfield because he read the game so well.

Charlton and Birmingham City both faced ownership issues during your time in charge of those clubs. How did that impact you?
At Charlton, I proved that I could compete even when I had no budget. With Birmingham, it was just a no-win situation. That was so stressful, it was crazy, but I still kept them in the division and introduced young players like JJ [Jordan James]. I got promised the world and then, when we stayed up, I was told we had to cut back. They never stuck to their word and that hurt me. I was too naive in believing what they told me. I had my hands tied behind my back most of the time, so people probably underestimate the job I did.

After leaving Birmingham, how did you end up becoming Montserrat manager?
The president [Vincent Cassell] went to Lyle Taylor, who I've worked with before, and asked him if I'd be interested. They then spoke to my agent. I went out to Montserrat, had a look around and met the president. He told me what their ambitions were. Of course, it's going to be difficult – I'm not stupid – but at least they were honest about what I was going into and didn't hide anything. I knew the majority of the squad were from non-league, but I came into coaching because I want to improve players.

Considering Montserrat's limitations in terms of population, resources and infrastructure, did you have any concerns about taking the job?
It was a new challenge and something different. I had reservations because, at the end of the day, we all want to win games. If you're so limited, then it's difficult. On the last trip, we had six or seven players injured. I only had one goalkeeper, one centre-half and one centre-midfielder. I was fielding players in positions they'd never played before. It was hard but I have to accept that there are going to be times like that. We have to enjoy those moments when we do get our full side together.

Lyle Taylor, Montserrat's captain, played for you at Charlton and Birmingham.

Coach...Bowyer on the training ground *Credit: Montserrat FA*

Why do you have such a close relationship with him?
From a selfish point of view, he scores goals. But you have to manage Lyle in the right way – put your arm around him and remind him he's a good player. You just need to give some players some love and make them feel important. I speak to his agent regularly and he says: 'You're the only one who can get the best out of him'. He's a good lad and he's improved because he wants to. He was a good finisher, but I made him a better one. His movement, his hold-up play and his work-rate are better. As a package, he's a better striker. I think that's why he respects me.

Your first game as Montserrat manager was a 3-2 victory away to Barbados. How significant was that?
They didn't expect us to beat them. Even their press man said: 'Barbados beat Montserrat at everything, from football to tiddlywinks'. I was thinking: 'Is this fella for real?' I said: 'Yeah, but things change'. I've got different philosophies. I've got different ways of playing. We're trying to bring the footballing side of things to Montserrat. Before I came, they just lumped it forward and played from there. I changed that from day one. We've come such a long way from when I arrived a year ago.

In November 2023, you beat the Dominican Republic, a country with a population of more than 11 million, 2-1 at home. How did that feel?
It was a statement because it shows that we're moving forward and the group are improving. I still think there's more to come. Teams need to be more wary of us than they were in the past. We had friendlies arranged in the summer, against countries that are a lot higher ranked than us, and they pulled out at the last minute because it would look bad if we beat them. They didn't want to take that risk. They're thinking: 'This little Montserrat isn't so little anymore'.

> "A lot of things go against us. We're just getting pushed to the back because we aren't as big as the others"

How much time have you spent on the island itself?
I've been over there two times – once to meet the president and then for a double-header last November. It's hard to get to Montserrat. You either fly to Antigua, and then get on a small plane that holds about seven or eight people, or you go on a boat. But there's been a problem with the boat service and some teams just refuse to get on those small planes so then we can't play at home. It's frustrating. From what I understand, everyone on the island is

Tough draw... Montserrat's Jeriel Dorsett in action against Nicaragua in 2026 World Cup qualifying

ABOVE and BELOW: Top targets...former Arsenal academy graduates Joe and Chris Willock qualify for Montserrat

excited and they're enjoying the football we're playing. They can see there's an improvement and they want to be part of it. We played two games at home and won both of them. That home advantage is massive.

The majority of the Montserrat squad play in the English lower leagues. How does that affect your work as manager?
We just lost 3-1 to Panama in the World Cup qualifiers, who are ranked 58th in the world. We were in the game, but our fitness isn't as good as other teams. It was 1-1 after we scored early in the second half and their bench was panicking. We were on top and looked the more likely to score until we hit the 70-minute mark and just started tiring. Also, the higher you go in football, as soon as you get told a bit of information, you take it on board. I'm pushing some of the players outside their comfort zone because it's the only way they're going to improve. I keep trying because one day it might just click.

What does it mean for your players, who have spent most of their lives in England, to represent the country of their heritage?
They all care. When I came, the players had never been given a cap before, so I fixed that. I got some proper caps made with the crest on. Everyone who plays for me will get a cap. Just the one, otherwise it will cost me a fortune! Some of the lads were choked up and had tears in their eyes. One day they can show their kids and grandkids that they played for Montserrat. On every trip, we keep reminding them that it's an honour to represent your country. It doesn't matter how big or small it is – give everything you've got.

Montserrat used to have quite an informal and ad hoc way of recruiting new players. How does that process work now?
We've been working hard behind the scenes to attract players and make sure there's going to be a future for Montserrat. We're doing ➤

Key man...Bowyer worked with Montserrat striker Lyle Taylor at Charlton and Birmingham

research and analysis all the time. There's a young lad who's just gone from Everton to Rangers [Arian Allen], who has Montserratian heritage, and I've spoken to his mum. There are a few playing for England Under-18s or Under-20s at the moment. They're at big clubs but the reality is that a lot of them will be released. That's when they realise that they're not going to play for England. My job is then to say: 'Come and play for us. We're a good side, we're going to keep improving and you'll enjoy our trips.'

Is it hard to get young players to commit to Montserrat?
Persuading players is difficult. The Willock brothers [Joe of Newcastle United and Chris of Cardiff City] want to try to play for England. They don't hide it. But if you can't, go and play international football. We had a 17-year-old who's at Fleetwood [Raffaele Cirino] and his brother [Lenni] come away with us. We played Nicaragua away in front of 15,000 people. It was quite a hostile atmosphere. What an experience for them. We've had a few others come in who haven't played men's football yet. If we can keep this little group together, in two years' time, when they've filled out a bit and understand the game more, we'll be a decent side.

You've previously said that Montserrat are targeting World Cup qualification. Do you believe that's achievable?
It's definitely achievable, but you need the luck of the draw. This time, our first two qualifiers were against Panama and Nicaragua, who are very strong teams. Because Panama refused to come and play in Montserrat, we had to play both games in Nicaragua. A lot of things go against us. We're just getting pushed to the back because we aren't as big as the others. It's wrong and I'm noticing it more and more.

How important is the CONCACAF Nations League in developing teams from small countries like Montserrat?
It gives us competitive games to drum into these young players where we're going and what we're trying to build. This is going to take time. At the moment, we've got a lot of players who are 17, 18, 19, 20. We've moved up the rankings so that's all we can keep doing. You can always improve. We finished third in League B last year; can we finish second this time? We'll keep pushing and see how high we can get as a group.

All-action midfielder... Bowyer played 397 Premier League games

How do you reflect on your own international career and the one England cap you won?
I did something that I always dreamed of as a kid. The most important thing is that I got my cap and I'm happy with it. I think I should have got more, and I think anyone in football would agree, but I didn't. It is what it is. I don't lose any sleep over it. I didn't play badly in that game against Portugal, which we drew 1-1. I got the assist for the goal we scored. Sometimes your face just doesn't fit. That's the game.

How have your experiences as a player shaped your outlook as a manager?
The game's changed so much, but I'm trying to bring a bit of my era into it. That attitude, competitiveness and winning mentality. That's all I cared about. As long as you can walk off the pitch, hold your head up high and say: 'I gave 100 per cent' then that's all you can do. That's just the way I am and what I try to pass on to the players.

"I got my cap and I'm happy with it. I think I should have got more, and I think anyone in football would agree"

One cap...Bowyer during his only England appearance

That's how we got promoted at Charlton – that drive and belief. I'm trying to make this group believe.

Which of your former managers had the biggest influence on the way you see football?
They all played a part. I took a bit from all of them. But on the playing side, I'd say George Graham. He made me an all-round midfielder. When I first went to Leeds, I'd just get forward and score goals. George made me run back as well. He didn't play me for weeks until I started doing that defensive side of the game. Now I was a box-to-box midfielder – scoring goals, clearing balls off the line, doing everything. That made me a better player. My subsequent managers and clubs benefitted from that.

Interview by Sean Cole

Key influence...George Graham managed Bowyer at Leeds

IRAN

Tehran arch-rivals... Esteghlal v Persepolis is Iran's biggest derby clash

2024-25 TEAMS

- Aluminium Arak
- Chadormalu
- Esteghlal
- Esteghlal Khuzestan
- Foolad
- Gol Gohar
- Havadar
- Kheybar
- Malavan
- Mes Rafsanjan
- Nassaji
- Persepolis
- Sepahan
- Shams Azar
- Tractor
- Zob Ahan

PERSIAN GULF PRO LEAGUE – A BRIEF HISTORY

A first nationwide league started in 1970, which ran until it was interrupted by the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the subsequent Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). After that ten-year hiatus, the national league restarted in 1989 and became the Azadegan League two years later. In 2001, the Iran FA decided to change and brought in the Iran Pro League, which continues to the present day and is currently known as the Persian Gulf Pro League. Historically the big Tehran clubs have dominated, especially Esteghlal and Persepolis, with Esteghlal Khuzestan the last non-capital club to be champions, back in 2015-16.

THE FORMAT

In 2013, the league was cut from 18 to 16 teams in a bid to raise standards, and it has stayed that way ever since. Those 16 play each other home and away over the season, which kicks off in September or October and finishes the following May or June. The bottom two go down to the Azadegan League, now the second tier, and the top two compete in the AFC Champions League Elite. The champions go directly to the group stage and the runners-up go into the play-offs for Asia's premier club competition. There's also a play-off place for the winners of the Hazfi Cup, Iran's premier knockout tournament.

HONOURS BOARD

Club	*Title wins*	*Runners-up*	*Last title*
Persepolis	16	10	2023-24
Esteghlal	9	11	2021-22
Pas Tehran	5	5	2003-04
Sepahan	5	4	2014-15
Saipa	3	0	2006-07
Foolad	2	0	2013-14
Esteghlal Khuzestan	1	0	2015-16

Does the quality of Iran's top flight match its passionate fanbase?
Iran is a proud football nation that produces more talented footballers than anywhere else in Asia with the exception of Japan and South Korea. While the league is well respected and clubs are usually competitive, Iranian domestic football punches below its weight.

Most clubs are owned directly or indirectly by the state, which leads to plenty of politics and not enough decisions made for football reasons. Commercial revenue is virtually non-existent, facilities around the country need investment – including the iconic Azadi Stadium in Tehran – and professionalism is lacking. US-led financial sanctions make it more difficult for clubs to operate in the global transfer market, to collect fees and prize money and much more besides. The devaluation of the local currency has made this even harder.

If the league had the financial resources to match its playing stock and passion for the game, it would be one of the best outside the Big Five of Europe.

Can anyone interrupt the Tehran duopoly of Esteghlal and Persepolis?
It is no surprise that Esteghlal and Persepolis usually win the title. They have fans from all over the country and are respected around Asia, but there has not been enough of a challenge from elsewhere. Last season, they fought out the title among themselves.

Sepahan have been the most likely but have lacked the strength in depth – and, say their supporters, suffer from officials' favouritism of the big two. The hope is that perhaps this season, with the expanded Champions League format – just like Europe, teams are playing eight group games instead of six – that there may be more of a possibility for Sepahan to win a first title for a decade.

ONE TO WATCH

Reza GHANDIPOUR

(Malavan)

The 18-year-old already has quite a reputation. The striker caught the eye with four goals and the MVP award at the Central Asia Under-16 Championship in 2022 and then carried on scoring for Iran's Under-17s during their run to the World Cup last 16 a year later. After making his debut last season for Paykan, he was signed by Malavan and started the current campaign with three goals in three games. There are high hopes that Ghandipour can follow in the footsteps of Mehdi Taremi, Sardar Azmoun and Ali Daei and play on the biggest stages, both with the national team and in Europe, where there has already been interest.

Challengers...Sepahan are the likeliest rivals to the Tehran giants

The Isfahan club started well and with Jose Morais, Jose Mourinho's assistant at Chelsea and Real Madrid, they have a coach who has won titles in Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and South Korea.

Where does the Iranian league currently rank in Asia?
Iran's league has fallen behind others in West Asia and it would be a surprise if an Iranian club won the Champions League. The last time that happened was in 1993 and although there have been final appearances – most recently for Persepolis in 2020 – increasingly other leagues have more money to buy better foreign players. This season that is likely to make an even bigger difference as the AFC's restrictions on foreign players (six last time) has been lifted, tellingly at the behest of Saudi Arabia.

The rise of the Saudi Pro League offers problems but also opportunities. Officials in Tehran have talked of getting closer to Saudi Arabia, made easier by the recent re-establishment of diplomatic relations. The same message has been heard coming out of Riyadh and signing Iranian players makes sense for Saudi clubs in terms of cost and ability to settle in the country. It hasn't happened yet but an influx of real cash would help, in the short term at least.

Would privatising the clubs help to raise standards?
Separating the clubs from the state would be a big step forward but it is easier said than done. If it can start with Persepolis and Esteghlal, and be a success, then everything could change.

Their meetings bring 100,000 fans and, with their heft and history, if they were professionally run by people with long-term visions their domination of Iran could extend to Asia and perhaps even the Club World Cup.

Yet they have traditionally been owned and badly-run by the Ministry of Sport. There has been talk of privatisation for years, but many thought they were both too important for the government to let them fall into the hands of private owners.

In April, it was announced that they would be sold to a consortium of banks and petrochemical companies. It is too early to say what will happen and whether this will bring change – but something needs to. If these Tehran giants can become professional and well-run clubs, they would set the standard for others.

John Duerden

Glenn Moore

Japan's stars shining brightly in the WSL

But there's still plenty of work to be done in the country's domestic league

Vivianne Miedema scoring for Manchester City on her return to Arsenal was the headline from the Women's Super League opening weekend, but the star performer was Brighton forward Kiko Seike as the Japan international became the first WSL player to hit a hat-trick on debut. By scoring in the 4-0 defeat of Everton, she highlighted the *Nadeshiko's* growing influence in the WSL: more than half of Japan's Paris Olympic squad now play in the league with Seike joined by 11 compatriots, including four at title contenders Manchester City.

As recently as 2020, only three Japanese players had appeared in the WSL, and none since 2014. Then, Mana Iwabuchi joined Aston Villa and, while English football rarely saw her best football, as a trailblazer her influence was significant – especially after she reacted to Japan's quarter-final exit at the Tokyo Olympics by arguing more players should move overseas to improve themselves.

Her words have been heeded, with 14 of this year's Olympic squad now playing abroad; at the last tournament in France, the 2019 World Cup, only Saki Kumagai (Lyon) and Rumi Utsugi (Reign FC) were doing so.

Dario Vidosic, Seike's manager at Brighton, said he expected the exodus to continue: "They are very good footballers. They work hard and are technically very, very good.

"In a squad environment they're the ultimate professionals. I don't think I've ever heard there's been a problem with a Japanese player. So I wouldn't be surprised if there's even more in the coming years heading over."

This is good news for the national team, which has struggled to live up to their 2011 World Cup win. Having their players exposed to the greater physicality and tactical variety of European football can only improve the *Nadeshiko*.

But what of the competition they have left behind, the WE League, which aimed to attract leading players and female coaches from around the world when it was launched with much fanfare in 2021? New arrivals were expected to drive visibility and standards, attracting fans, sponsors and TV coverage. But it hasn't worked out like that, even with the federation offering $31,000 for signings from the top 12 FIFA-ranked nations to help with salaries and translators. Last season there were only 12 foreign players, and none in the top four clubs. Former Espanyol coach Jordi Ferron at Kobe Leonessa was the only foreigner in the dugout.

> "They are very good footballers. They work hard and are technically very, very good. I wouldn't be surprised if there's even more in the coming years"
>
> Brighton manager Dario Vidosic on Japanese players

Trailblazer...Mana Iwabuchi arrived in the WSL in 2020

He has since been joined by another Spaniard, Ismael Ortuno Castillo, at JEF United Chiba, but only three foreigners played on September's opening weekend: Chiba defender Vyan Sampson, once of West Ham United, who played in the 2023 World Cup for Jamaica, and Spaniards Carlota Suarez and Paola Soldevila, both at Kobe.

Meanwhile last season's average gate of 1,722, while a 23 per cent rise on the previous campaign, was not hugely up from the 1,300 the predecessor Nadeshiko League averaged in 2019 before COVID-19. The initial target was 5,000, rising to 10,000 after a decade.

As a consequence, the league is already onto its third chair with Haruna Takada stepping down in September admitting: "We were unable to raise awareness of the league."

The pandemic had a big impact on the nascent competition, especially as local restrictions were more stringent than most countries. The language barrier is also a problem, especially in a league that stresses team cohesion.

The main issue, though, is budgetary. The level of investment is insufficient to

Japan's WSL star... Kiko Seike in action for Brighton

keep Japanese players, never mind sign leading foreigners. In that respect, Red Bull's takeover of Omiya Ardija Ventus may be worth watching. The men's club are third tier but the women's team are top flight.

The lofty ideals of promoting Women's Empowerment (hence WE League) and promoting LGBT rights have also struggled to gain traction in Japan's traditional culture.

However, if the league is judged not so much on its own ambitions (which initially were linked to a planned Women's World Cup bid), but more in line with the J. League's success in developing local players, it is prospering. The professional environment has made players better equipped to succeed overseas, which draws foreign clubs to buy more and brings in revenue. FIFA's mid-year transfer market report revealed WE League clubs earned $427,000 from overseas sales, the sixth highest in the world.

The league's problems are replicated elsewhere, notably in Australia which also has a dozen players in WSL and a home league struggling for attention.

For a while, players could combine playing at home with being in the US' National Women's Soccer League, but that became complicated as both seasons lengthened and the WSL's rise offered an attractive alternative.

Manchester City's Alanna Kennedy moved between Sydney, New York, Melbourne and Orlando, before moving to the WSL in 2020, initially on loan at Tottenham Hotspur. "It was a lot of back and forth, which didn't allow for much of a break," she says. "Although the leagues complemented each other it was continuous football.

"Playing in the WSL allows you to play the Champions League as well. And you get that off-season, which is so important for the longevity of your career.

"It is tough. As Aussies, we want to grow our league in Australia. But it's wanting to be in the best leagues across the world, which are longer and playing against quality opposition every week."

Having made the same journey from Australia to Europe as a player, and now as a coach – swapping Melbourne City for Brighton – Vidosic understands the lure.

"I'm sure the girls had the same dream as I had when I was a kid, waking up at 4.30 in the morning to watch Champions League, and staying up at night and waking early to watch the Premier League. When you have that opportunity you're realising a dream, and it's very hard to turn it down."

With thanks to Alex Bishop and Dan Orlowitz in Tokyo

Round-up

Dumped out... Mary Earps reacts after conceding to Juventus' Amalie Vangsgaard

PSG OUT, GALA THROUGH

Semi-finalists in four of the last five seasons, Paris Saint-Germain were the shock losers in Champions League qualifying as they were beaten home and away by Juventus – not the start that England goalkeeper Mary Earps, their new star signing, was hoping for.

Manchester City beat Paris FC 8-0 on aggregate and Arsenal defeated Hacken to join Chelsea in the group stage – the first time three English clubs have made it that far.

Turkish champions Galatasaray and Sweden's Hammarby are making their debuts, while Atletico Madrid, Fiorentina, Eintracht Frankfurt, Benfica, Sporting, Rosenborg, Linkoping and Anderlecht were knocked out in the qualifiers.

Group A
Lyon, Wolfsburg, Roma, Galatasaray
Group B
Chelsea, Real Madrid, Twente, Celtic
Group C
Bayern Munich, Arsenal, Juventus, Valerenga
Group D
Barcelona, Manchester City, St Polten, Hammarby

BARCA REJECT RECORD OFFER FOR WALSH

As the transfer window closed, Barcelona turned down a world record €1.1m (£930,000) bid by Arsenal for England midfielder Keira Walsh, who is out of contract next summer.

Late moves that did go through included another Barca midfielder, Spanish World Cup winner Maria Perez, joining ambitious second-tier side London City Lionesses, England winger Nikita Parris moving to Brighton from Manchester United, and Aston Villa paying £250,000 for Levante's Gabi Nunes, who impressed for Brazil at the Paris Olympics.

Walsh no-go...Barcelona rejected Arsenal's offer

SINCLAIR AND POPP CALL TIME

Canada's greatest player, Christine Sinclair, is to retire at the end of the NWSL season. The 41-year-old, who scored 190 goals in 331 internationals, has been playing for Portland Thorns since 2013. She won Olympic gold at Tokyo 2020.

Another Olympic winner, Alexandra Popp has quit international football after a 15-year career with Germany, going into her farewell week with 67 goals in 144 games. The 33-year-old will continue playing for Wolfsburg. The duo's announcements followed the news that former England forward Toni Duggan was also hanging up her boots.

Canada legend... Christine Sinclair

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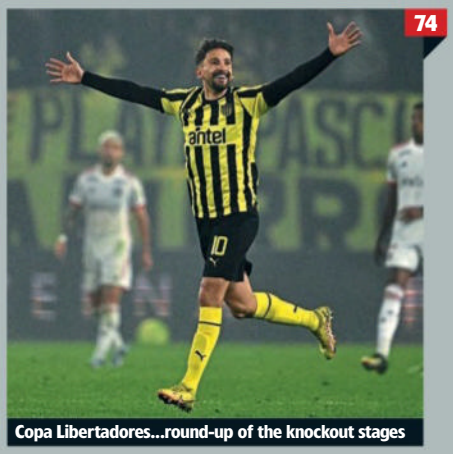

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Copa Libertadores...round-up of the knockout stages

South America

TIM VICKERY

Copa can still surprise

Two non-Brazilian teams and a club chasing their first-ever Copa final gives this year's Libertadores semi-final line-up an unexpected twist

Update

Two famous names of South American football stand in the way of a sixth consecutive Brazilian victory in the Copa Libertadores. Curiously, they are, respectively, the first-ever winners of the competition and the last team to win it before the start of the Brazilian domination: Penarol of Uruguay and Argentina's River Plate.

Marcelo Gallardo, who took River to that triumph in 2018, is back in charge. But he has yet to stamp his mark on the current team, which still bears the imprint of Martin Demichelis, who replaced him at the end of 2022 and then gave way to him at the end of July. Where Gallardo seeks to open out the field, Demichelis sought to stay compact, winning the ball high and bursting through with quick-passing moves. Gallardo had a month between the quarters and the semi-finals to do things his way, and has the incentive of a final in River's home city – and almost certainly in their own stadium – on November 30. But to get there, the team will surely have to improve on the unconvincing 2-1 aggregate win over Chile's Colo-Colo in the quarter-finals.

River have reached the last four without having to play Brazilian opposition. That now changes

Shock exit... Flamengo's David Luiz reacts to his side's quarter-final defeat to Penarol

Match-winning sub...Deyverson celebrates firing Atletico Mineiro into the last four

as they come up against 2013 champions Atletico Mineiro.

It is a battle of Argentine coaches. Atletico's Gabriel Milito is an interesting figure that seeks to build his teams around a possession-based attacking approach. The overcrowded calendar of the domestic Brazilian game has proved a problem – there was a mini-crisis in the middle of the year when the games came thick and fast and players were absent during the Copa America, and Milito has acknowledged the need at times for a more pragmatic approach. In the second round, Atletico were fortunate to get a 2-1 aggregate victory over a desperately limited San Lorenzo side from Argentina. But by the quarters Atletico seemed to have weathered the storm, ending the reign of Fluminense with a 2-1 aggregate win that was more emphatic than the scoreline suggests.

Struggling against relegation in the league and having sacked Fernando Diniz – last year's Copa-winning coach – Fluminense under Mano Menezes were more orthodox, and duller. They won a tight first leg 1-0 with a late goal, but were battered for the entire return match, with Atletico missing a penalty and wasting chances before two goals from substitute centre-forward Deyverson settled the tie.

Fluminense claimed their first Libertadores title last year, and now Rio de Janeiro rivals Botafogo are seeking to do the same. Portuguese coach Artur Jorge, formerly in charge of Braga, took over with the team in trouble in the group phase, but led them through to set up a round-of-16 clash with Palmeiras, South American champions in 2020 and 2021.

Botafogo seemed to have it in the bag when, with five minutes of normal time to go, Palmeiras needed three goals to force a penalty shootout. But they got two, only had a third ruled out after a long VAR check concluded that there had been a handball, and still had time to hit the angle of post and crossbar from a free-kick.

There was similar drama in another all-Brazilian tie in the next round. Botafogo were superb at home in the first leg versus Sao Paulo, but were held to a 0-0 draw.

Fluminense claimed their first Libertadores title last year, and now Rio de Janeiro rivals Botafogo are seeking to do the same

Away from home a week later, they were dominant once more but wobbled at the end again, conceding a late equaliser that meant they needed a tense penalty shootout to book their place in the semis. Is this a psychological problem, finding it hard to cope with the prospect of victory? Or might it be more physical, with the team's intense style of play difficult to sustain over the course of 90 minutes?

Botafogo would now have expected to be facing Flamengo, their biggest local rivals and continental champions in 2019 and 2022. But in the big shock of the round, they fell to Penarol – a famous old name, true, but one whose last Libertadores triumph came way back in 1987.

After making it out of the group phase, the Uruguayans were seen at their best in the 4-0 second-round destruction of Bolivia's The Strongest, a night when attacking midfielder Leo Fernandez hit the heights.

Flamengo, though, represented a much tougher challenge, with a squad of awesome strength and coach Tite, with his World Cup pedigree. The playing field was levelled slightly by the horrors of the Brazilian calendar, and the number of injuries Flamengo sustained. Most could be replaced, but the loss of centre-forward Pedro, who suffered a serious knee injury while training with the national team, was a massive blow. Penarol took advantage, biding their time and breaking out to register a famous 1-0 victory at the Maracana, and then holding on in front of their own fans for a goalless draw. In both matches, Flamengo had the vast majority of possession but barely a chance to show for it.

But if Penarol's qualification was a source of great joy in Uruguay, the country also suffered the tragedy of the death of Nacional defender Juan Izqueirdo, who collapsed on the field during the second round match away to Sao Paulo. Respect is being paid to his memory before all of the matches in this year's competition.

Turn over for the semi-final draw and Copa Sudamericana update

Semi-finalists... River Plate celebrate beating Colo-Colo of Chile at the Estadio Monumental

South America

TIM VICKERY

Update

Sudamericana serves up Brazil v Argentina double-header

South America's secondary club competition delivers a mouth-watering semi-final showdown between the continent's two dominant countries

Everyone else has fallen by the wayside, leaving a double helping of Argentina versus Brazil in the semi-finals of the Copa Sudamericana, the continent's Europa League equivalent.

The big disappointment was Ecuador, whose teams won this competition in the last two years and in three of the last five, but their participation ended in the last 16 when reigning champions LDU of Quito were knocked out by Argentine outfit Lanus.

At the same stage, the remaining two teams from Chile – Huachipato and Palestino – were easily dispatched (8-1 and 6-2 on aggregate, respectively, by Racing of Argentina and Colombia's Independiente Medellin). Paraguay fought on, with a domestic battle for a place in the quarter-finals between the recently dominant Libertad and little Sportivo Ameliano, enjoying their first international adventure. It went to a tense penalty shootout, where Ameliano had a chance to clinch the tie, but wasted it. Libertad marched on, only to fall 3-1 on aggregate in the quarters to Cruzeiro of Brazil, despite a goal from evergreen 43-year-old striker Roque Santa Cruz.

Cruzeiro, who have just appointed

High hopes...Racing defeated Athletico Paranaense in the quarter-finals

Shootout victors...Lanus saw off Independiente Medellin on penalties

Proven winner...Cruzeiro's Fernando Diniz led Fluminense to the Copa Libertadores in 2023

coach Fernando Diniz, will now meet Lanus, who came through a penalty shootout against Medellin, a result that ends the participation of teams from the north of the continent in this year's competitions.

Languishing in mid-table in Argentina, Lanus have been a welcome surprise in the Sudamericana. Their matches with Medellin were tight – two draws – but in the previous round, they ended the reign of LDU of Quito with wins home and away. Cruzeiro, spending freely since former great Ronaldo handed over control, are strong favourites, but the Argentines should not be underestimated.

The other semi-final looks especially fascinating. Corinthians of Brazil are going through a turbulent time. Awash with financial problems, they find themselves fighting against relegation in the league. Cup competitions may be a distraction, but they may also be a place to pick up morale. In the quarters, they beat compatriots Fortaleza home and away with surprising ease. And, for all their problems, they remain a giant club with a squad that has been substantially reinforced of late in their battle to avoid the drop. They have been relegated to the second tier only once before, in 2007, and are determined not to let it happen again.

> Cruzeiro, who have just appointed coach Fernando Diniz, will now meet Lanus, who have been a welcome surprise in the Sudamericana

They now face Racing, for whom this competition is anything but a distraction. Domestic form has been disappointing for the Avellaneda-based club, but there are high hopes for this squad and they are all pinned on the Sudamericana, especially after a rousing 4-1 win at home to Brazil's Athletico Paranaense. Defending a 1-0 lead from the first leg, the visitors were parading their new coach, their former midfielder and the one-time Argentina international Lucho Gonzalez, and he endured a bittersweet start to his new career.

This is Athletico's centenary, which they aimed to celebrate by winning a title they had previously claimed in 2021, but it was not to be. That first-leg advantage lasted a mere 18 seconds, and Racing ran riot in the first half. The pain of defeat and elimination may have been partially mitigated by the fact that Gonzalez is a Racing fan.

Welcome distraction... Corinthians are facing relegation worries domestically

THE DRAWS

COPA LIBERTADORES

Tuesday-Wednesday October 22-23

Atletico Mineiro v River Plate

Botafogo v Penarol

Tuesday-Wednesday October 29-30

River Plate v Atletico Mineiro

Penarol v Botafogo

COPA SUDAMERICANA

Wednesday-Thursday, October 23-24

Cruzeiro v Lanus

Corinthians v Racing

Wednesday-Thursday, October 30-31

Lanus v Cruzeiro

Racing v Corinthians

Africa

MARK GLEESON

Holders handed tough draw

Reigning African champions Al Ahly will face two tough opponents in the group stage of the 2024-25 CAF Champions League

African champions Al Ahly of Egypt have been handed a tough examination of their potential to retain their CAF Champions League crown – and extend their record number of triumphs in the competition – after being paired with Algerian outfit CR Belouizdad and Orlando Pirates of South Africa in the group phase, which gets underway at the end of November.

Al Ahly have struggled to get through the group stage of the competition in recent seasons, making life difficult for themselves, only then to find their form in the knockout stages and go on to take the trophy.

The Cairo club have won four of the last five titles in a dominant show that defied their results in the earlier stages, but they can ill afford to be slow starters this time round as they chase a 13th title, being paired with two tough opponents in the battle for the top two spots in the group that secure progress to the last eight.

Belouizdad, who have moved to strengthen their squad this season, recruiting Algeria's record goalscorer Islam Slimani, shared the same group with Al Ahly in the last campaign and held them to a goalless draw in Cairo, followed by another 0-0 stalemate in Algeria.

But, in the end, Al Ahly advanced while Belouizdad missed out on the knockout round because of poor results in their other away matches.

Pirates won the title when it was the old-style African Champions Cup in 1995 and were beaten by Al Ahly in the 2013 Champions League final, but have not participated in the group phase since 2018-19.

Last season, they suffered a surprise defeat in the preliminary knockout round to Jwaneng Galaxy of Botswana and this season drew them again at the same stage. This time, they avenged their embarrassment with a 3-0 aggregate triumph.

Pirates do have an incredible domestic cup record under their

Rematch... holders Al Ahly and Belouizdad of Algeria have been drawn together again in Group C

Back in the big time...Orlando Pirates last reached the group stage in 2018-19

Spanish coach Jose Riveiro, who is in his third season with the club and finding a consistency long absent in the Soweto outfit. The only other coach in the 87-year history of the club to last three full seasons was the former Dutch World Cup captain Ruud Krol between 2008 and 2011.

The other team in Group C is Stade d'Abidjan, who will compete in the group phase for the first time and are likely to be overwhelmed on their debut appearance after scraping through the two preliminary knockout rounds.

Maniema Union from the Democratic Republic of Congo are also newcomers as are Djoliba of Mali, who finally reached the group stage at the 12th attempt. Astonishingly, they are the first club from the West African country to get this far in the continent's top club competition since the Champions League format was introduced in 1997. Mali are a consistent force at national team level and Djoliba were Confederation Cup runners-up in 2012, while Bamako neighbours Stade Malien won the same competition back in 2009.

Djoliba share Group D with Egypt's Pyramids, Sagrada Esperanca from Angola and top seeds Esperance of Tunisia, who were runners-up to Al Ahly last season.

Al Ahly and Esperance will both be making their 22nd appearance in the Champions League group phase.

Maniema Union are in a group with Mamelodi Sundowns of South Africa, participating in the group phase for a tenth successive season, and the Moroccan pair of Raja Casablanca and Royal Armed Forces (aka AS FAR). The Confederation of African Football do not have rules stopping clubs from the same country being drawn in the same group, somewhat defeating the purpose of international competition.

Moroccan champions ...Raja Casablanca have won the African crown three times

Raja and the army club are expected to fight a fierce battle alongside the top-seeded Sundowns in their bid to advance to the quarter-finals.

Raja are on the comeback trail after failing to compete in last season's Champions League. It gave them time to concentrate on successfully completing the double in Morocco, but German head coach Joe Zinnbauer has since left for more lucrative climes in Saudi Arabia, replaced by the Bosnian Rusmir Cviko.

> The Cairo club can ill afford to be slow starters this time round

Royal Armed Forces compete for only the second time in the group stage and after an 18-year gap. They also have a new coach in ex-Poland boss Czeslaw Michniewicz.

In the preliminary round, there was an historic first-round success for Somalia's Dekedaha, who eliminated Arta/Solar 7 from neighbouring Djibouti with both legs hosted in neutral Tanzania. It was the first time in 36 years that a Somalian club had won a tie in African club competition – the last occurence was in 1988 when Wagad FC reached the second preliminary round at the expense of Rwanda's Panthere Noires.

THE DRAWS

CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

GROUP A
- TP Mazembe
- Young Africans
- Al Hilal
- MC Alger

GROUP B
- Mamelodi Sundowns
- Raja Casablanca
- Royal Armed Forces
- Maniema Union

GROUP C
- Al Ahly
- CR Belouizdad
- Orlando Pirates
- Stade d'Abidjan

GROUP D
- Esperance
- Pyramids
- Sagrada Esperanca
- Djoliba

CONFEDERATION CUP

GROUP A
- Simba
- CS Sfaxien
- CS Constantine
- Bravos do Maquis

GROUP B
- RS Berkane
- Stade Malien
- Stellenbosch
- Lunda Sul

GROUP C
- USM Alger
- ASEC Abidjan
- ASC Jaraaf
- Orapa United

GROUP D
- Zamalek
- Al Masry
- Enyimba
- Black Bulls

The group phase of the Champions League will be played on the same weekends as that of the Confederation Cup, where the big talking point was holders Zamalek being drawn in the same group as fellow Egyptians Al Masry.

The tournament's group phase kicks off on November 26 and concludes on January 18, with the knockout rounds taking place next spring.

Australia

SIMON HILL

Big-name signings light up new A-League campaign

Arrivals of World Cup winner Juan Mata and former Brazil winger Douglas Costa provide welcome boost for Australia's top flight

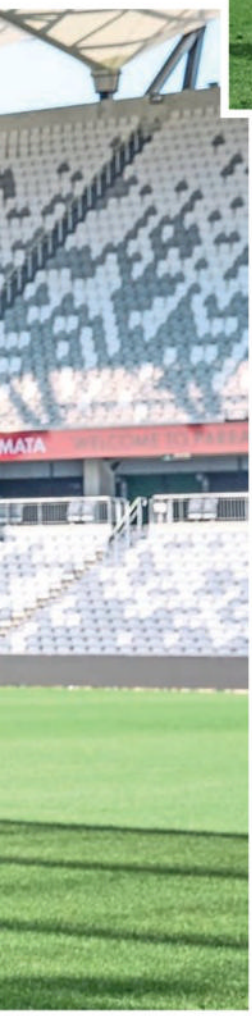
The A-League will move into its 20th year in 2025. Its survival in a rather hostile landscape is something to be celebrated – yet the feeling remains the competition is yet to reach anything like its full potential.

The latest round of austerity cuts on the back of some disastrous decisions (the sale of the Grand Final venue – later rescinded – being one), have hit hard. Revenue distributions to the clubs have been reduced to a bare minimum, and so it's somewhat surprising that the league has been able to attract some genuine marquee names for 2024-25.

Leading the way is Juan Mata who, even at 36, has the sort of star quality that will attract some of the casual fans the A-League has long looked to win over. Mata has signed for Western Sydney Wanderers, the perennial underachievers who are, yet again, under new leadership in the shape of coach Alen Stajcic.

Mata's arrival followed hot on the heels of rivals Sydney FC capturing the signature of Douglas Costa. The Brazilian has already shown flashes of his undoubted pedigree in the Asian

First impressions ...Douglas Costa impressed in the AFC Champions League Two



Exciting arrival... ex-Valencia, Chelsea, Manchester United and Spain playmaker Juan Mata has joined Western Sydney Wanderers

Champions League Two – the newly renamed AFC Cup – and the presence of both should ensure a full house for the Sydney derby on the opening weekend.

Elsewhere, Auckland FC have been added to the competition, which will run with an awkward 13 clubs in the new campaign. The league wanted to add a team in Canberra as well, but have yet to find the required backing – it's hoped they will compete in 2025-26.

Bankrolled by Bill Foley (who also owns Bournemouth), the New Zealanders have snared Hiroki Sakai, a Japan international of 74 caps. He will form part of a defence in front of Alex Paulsen, the former Wellington Phoenix goalkeeper. Paulsen signed for Bournemouth, but was then immediately loaned out to the newcomers, which should make for a rather fractious atmosphere for the New Zealand derby, already labelled "The Kiwi Klassico".

Back-to-back champions Central Coast Mariners have again lost almost half their title-winning team, including last season's Player of the Year Josh Nisbet to Ross County plus Dan Hall (Auckland), Max Balard (NAC Breda), Jacob Farrell (Portsmouth) and the retiring Danny Vukovic. To compensate, manager Mark Jackson has repatriated former club captain, Trent Sainsbury, as well as adding Alfie McCalmont from Carlisle United and Brazilian forward Vitor Feijao. Winning a third consecutive title would be unprecedented – but don't rule the Mariners out.

Melbourne Victory, last season's beaten grand finalists, appointed ex-Melbourne City coach Patrick Kisnorbo as the successor to the Socceroos-bound Tony Popovic – and his team has already shown potential by reaching a third Australia Cup final. Nikos Vergos has arrived from Greece to provide some competition for Bruno Fornaroli in attack, and goalkeeper Mitch Langerak will also return after the culmination of the J. League campaign in December.

> **Even at 36, Juan Mata has the sort of star quality that will attract some of the casual fans the A-League has long looked to win over**

Melbourne City welcome back two Socceroos – Nathaniel Atkinson from Hearts and Aziz Behich from his loan spell with Al Nassr in Saudi Arabia – but were unable to keep hold of their standout player last season, Tolgay Arslan, who opted for a move to Japan with Sanfrecce Hiroshima.

Adelaide United must do without Nestory Irankunda, who is already showing signs of making a breakthrough at Bayern Munich, and their top scorer last season, Hiroshi Ibusuki, who has switched to Western United. Archie Goodwin has arrived from Newcastle Jets, while Ben Folami has made the move to South Australia from Melbourne Victory, looking to recapture the form that earned him an Australia call-up in 2022.

Macarthur – still recovering from an alleged betting scandal that saw their best player, Ulises Davila, arrested and subsequently have his contract mutually terminated – reached the Australia Cup final for the second time in three years. Valere Germain stepped up, scoring four goals in four ties including the winner against South Melbourne in the semi-final, but then blotted his copybook by earning a second yellow card, meaning he missed the final.

Elsewhere, Brisbane Roar have tapped into the under-utilised Asian market to snap up Rafael Struick (Indonesia) and Walid Shour (Lebanon), Newcastle Jets can finally plan ahead for a future with certainty, after the club was bought (after three years in temporary ownership) by Maverick Sports, and Perth Glory look to move away from the foot of the table under the leadership of David Zdrilic, who has arrived in WA after serving as Ufuk Talay's assistant at Sydney FC.

As ever, off-field issues will have equal billing with the on-field action, especially with the TV deal entering its final two seasons. APL – the league's governing body – has promised a more "football-focused" approach, which begs the question: what was the priority in the first place?

Comeback... Trent Sainsbury is back at champions Central Coast Mariners ten years after leaving for Europe

United States

JAMES NALTON

Magic of the US Open Cup alive and well

United States' oldest cup competition can still throw up fascinating storylines despite threats to its future

The Lamar Hunt US Open Cup didn't become one of the longest continuously running cup competitions in world football without overcoming the occasional obstacle.

Throughout its 111-year history, the national domestic cup competition for men's soccer in the United States which, unusually for American sport, includes teams from up and down the US league system, has navigated a sporting landscape as challenging and as diverse as the terrain of the country in which it is played.

In 2024, it faced one such obstacle that threatened its very existence, this time put in place by the country's top tier, Major League Soccer.

In the end, the 2024 trophy went to an MLS side, Los Angeles FC, who defeated another MLS side and four-time US Open Cup winners Sporting Kansas City in the final, but there was a point where the participation of the top division was in doubt, which in turn threatened the future of the Open Cup.

In December 2023, MLS decided to withdraw all of its teams from the 2024 edition of the Open Cup. The reasons given included schedule congestion and an accusation that the tournament was not at a level expected of top-level professional soccer.

Though it has a big influence, as shown by the fact it got some of its own way in this situation, MLS is not the only stakeholder deciding what happens in the United States Soccer Federation (US Soccer), which runs the Open Cup. A token compromise was reached where MLS entered eight teams

Cup magic ...El Farolito were one of this season's US Open Cup's surprise packages

Review

plus 11 reserve teams from its MLS Next Pro league.

Though the situation was far from ideal, and the future of the cup remains uncertain, the Next Pro teams added their own dynamic to the 2024 tournament.

All of this was epitomised by New York City FC II and their run to the last 16, during which they played their home games at Belson Stadium – a small ground built on top of a parking garage in Queens. That kind of venue is part of the magic of the cup, but NYCFC II's presence in the tournament simultaneously served to highlight the absence of 18 MLS teams, including NYCFC themselves.

NYCFC II, a team ultimately owned by the City Football Group, received a $25,000 prize for being the third-tier team to progress the furthest. Such rewards can make a huge difference for teams at that level, but for a New York City FC franchise about to build a new $780 million stadium in Queens, it was a drop in the Atlantic Ocean.

Over on the Pacific coast, San Franciscan side El Farolito received another of the $25,000 prizes for being the open division (similar to non-league) team with the deepest cup run, edging Miami United and Lubbock Matadors, who also reached the third round, on tiebreakers.

El Farolito are owned by a San Francisco-based chain of burrito restaurants of the same name and have actually won the tournament once, back in 1993 when the team was known as CD Mexico. Fully embracing the theme, the club's supporters group are called the Burrito Brava.

El Farolito memorably defeated Portland Timbers II in the first round of this year's tournament and knocked out Central Valley Fuego of USL League 1 in the second, before losing to USL Championship side Oakland Roots in the third round after extra-time. Their progress was noticed in the city (which, perhaps surprisingly, doesn't have a professional soccer team) enough to make the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

There were many other moments of cup magic, serving as reminders of why this tournament needs to live on and be backed, rather than abandoned.

ABOVE: Open Cup champions...LAFC striker Olivier Giroud lifts the trophy

ABOVE RIGHT: Common consent... Philadelphia Union fans show their support for the US Open Cup

In their first Open Cup appearance, burgeoning USL League Two team, Vermont Green, defeated USL Championship side Lexington SC in front of a packed stadium; Championship side Detroit City FC knocked out defending champions Houston Dynamo in the round of 32; and Des Moines Menace temporarily secured the services of former pros Sacha Kljestan, AJ DeLaGarza, Brian Rowe and Roger Espinoza (an FA Cup winner with Wigan Athletic in 2013).

MLS should be as much a part of this open tournament as the lower league teams and amateur qualifiers.

Eventual winners, LAFC, are a team that have consistently been in the mix for titles since their inaugural season in 2018. The 3-1 win against Sporting Kansas City adds a first Open Cup to their trophy cabinet to go alongside two Supporters' Shields and an MLS Cup.

Summer signing Olivier Giroud scored his first goal in domestic competition, while 40-year-old veteran Kei Kamara added a goal in extra-time alongside another from Omar Campos to give the LA side a 3-1 win.

> **"A lot of teams in the second division, third division or amateur look forward to the Open Cup, so please don't take it away"**
>
> **LAFC forward Kei Kamara**

"We need to make sure they don't take MLS away from this," Kamara said after the game. "This is amazing, this is American soccer right here. You can't take away from our history. A lot of teams in the second division, third division or amateur look forward to the Open Cup, so please don't take it away."

There is hope that 2025 will look much brighter for the US Open Cup, qualification for which has already begun, but a lot depends on the attitude of MLS towards it, and whether US Soccer allows the top division to withdraw its teams once again.

Canada

DANNY LEWIS

CPL clubs close the gap in Canadian Championship

The latest Championship, which includes teams from MLS, the Canadian Premier League and other leagues, shows that standards are improving across Canada

Winners...Major League Soccer's Vancouver Whitecaps came out on top in the final

While the finale of the 2024 Canadian Championship brought a familiar conclusion, the route to that point was anything but as the dominance of Toronto FC, CF Montreal and Vancouver Whitecaps was tested more than ever.

And it was not just Canada's domestic top flight, the Canadian Premier League (CPL), that produced surprise packages. There has been plenty of discussion about the fact that the league does not have a club from Quebec, and CS Saint-Laurent took their opportunity to add to those conversations.

The team, which plays in the Ligue1 Quebec division, part of the third tier of Canadian football, came up against CPL outfit HFX Wanderers in the preliminary round, and defied their semi-professional status with a penalty shootout victory after a 2-2 draw.

Demonstrating the value of this competition as a platform, three of the part-timers – Safwane Mlah, Loic Kwemi (both Valour) and Jefferson Alphonse (HFX Wanderers) – were snapped up by CPL clubs shortly after the win. It was therefore not a huge surprise, nor any diminishment of their achievement, when Saint-Laurent were beaten 11-1 on aggregate by the 2017 MLS champions Toronto FC in the next round, with striker Deandre Kerr helping himself to five goals to secure the Golden Boot.

Things weren't so simple for Canada's other MLS clubs in the quarter-final as Cavalry and Forge proved that CPL teams can compete.

Vancouver Whitecaps only got past Cavalry on away goals, winning the first leg 2-1 before a Ranko Veselinovic own goal saw the Cavs win 1-0 at BC Place.

Forge went one better against CF Montreal, beating them 2-1 away in their fourth Canadian Championship meeting after drawing 1-1 at home. The Hammers took their scalp at Saputo Stadium as Daniel Parra opened the scoring before Kwasi Poku slotted past Sebastian Breza, ensuring that Victor Wanyama's header was inconsequential.

For both of the MLS clubs' coaches, the experiences were traumatic. Despite progressing, Vancouver coach Vanni Sartini called his side's second-leg loss "by far the lowest point in my career at the Whitecaps," while Montreal's

Laurent Courtois said he was "ashamed" after falling to Forge.

Writing on social media, CPL commissioner Mark Noonan said that those damning indictments "make no sense", adding: "Like MLS, we are a FIFA D1 league. Yes, we are a lot younger, but produce a good standard. No shame in that."

The fact that those results came in MLS stadiums adds to the point that CPL clubs are to be respected despite the MLS sides' bigger resources and longer existence. In addition, match-winner Poku has already made the next step in his career by joining RWD Molenbeek, who are fighting for promotion to Belgium's top tier, and receiving his first call-up to Canada's senior squad in October.

In their semi-final, Forge were drawn against Toronto and raced into a 2-0 lead after just 14 minutes, with Poku on target again after Beni Badibanga had opened the scoring.

Yet the mood at Tim Hortons Field was punctured when Toronto's German forward Prince Owusu bundled home what proved to be a vital goal in the 88th minute. In the return leg at BMO Field, Lorenzo Insigne's volley gave Toronto a 1-0 win as they became the second MLS side to beat a CPL outfit on away goals.

Aside from scoring the decider, Insigne was involved in heated moments across both legs, and the ill will continued after the final whistle, suggesting that a genuine rivalry has developed between the two clubs.

In the other side of the draw, Scottish playmaker Ryan Gauld ensured that the Whitecaps' route to the final came with less drama, scoring the only goal of each leg against Pacific with a flicked header in the first and a rebound in the second.

The final demonstrated how important the competition can be for MLS players, too. Whitecaps reserve goalkeeper Isaac Boehmer hadn't played a single league minute this season before putting in a Player-of-the-Match performance to be named the tournament's MVP and Best Young Canadian Player.

"I think my friend Jesse [Marsch, Canada head coach] should look at him because he's a very good goalkeeper," said Sartini after the final. "He would start in a lot of MLS teams."

The biggest moment of a goalless 90 minutes came when the 22-year-old saved Federico Bernardeschi's penalty. Those heroics continued into the shootout as, after the Caps' Stuart Armstrong was denied and Toronto's Matty Longstaff hit the bar, Boehmer convincingly stopped Kosi Thompson, allowing Bjorn Inge Utvik to convert the telling spot-kick.

For the Whitecaps, this was a third consecutive victory in the Canadian Championship, and the second to come with a penalty-shootout win against Toronto. It also secured a 100 per cent record in the competition for Canada's MLS clubs in its 17th edition. Yet, on this evidence, their dominance will not last much longer.

It was not just Canada's domestic top flight that produced surprise packages

Worthy match-up ...CPL side Forge pushed former MLS champions Toronto all the way in the semis

Semi-final hero...Vancouver Whitecaps' Scottish playmaker Ryan Gauld

Caribbean

STEVE MENARY

Dominican clubs impress in Caribbean Cup

The Dominican Republic has two sides in the semi-final of the regional competition, with Jamaica and Haiti taking the other two spots

The group stage of the 2024 CONCACAF Caribbean Cup proved a great showcase for clubs from the Dominican Republic's top flight, the Liga Dominicana de Futbol (LDF).

Ten clubs from five Caribbean Football Union members qualified for the region's premier club tournament. The winners qualify for the last 16 of the 2025 CONCACAF Champions Cup, while the runners-up and third-place sides go into the first round.

Reigning LDF champions Cibao (who have won the last four domestic league titles) and Moca (LDF runners-up in 2023 and semi-finalists in the recently concluded 2024 season) both strolled through Group B of the Caribbean Cup, guaranteeing the Dominican Republic of at least one club in CONCACAF's premier club tournament in 2025.

The performance is a marked improvement for Cibao, who went into the first edition of the overhauled Caribbean Cup in 2023 as the region's top-ranked side in CONCACAF's club rankings but finished third in their group behind eventual winners Robinhood of Suriname and Jamaica's Harbour View.

Cibao were again the highest-placed side in CONCACAF's latest club rankings and made no mistakes this time, despite starting with a goalless draw against domestic rivals Moca. Scheldeur Sainvilus' side edged out Antiguan champions Grenades 2-1 before a crunch game with Port of Spain in Trinidad & Tobago.

In front of their home crowd, the current TT Premier Football League champions coasted into a 2-0 half-time lead before Dominican Republic international midfielder Jean Carlos Lopez scored for the second game in a row.

Port of Spain were still ahead with 15 minutes to play, but a brace from Colombian winger Rivaldo Correa sealed a crucial victory.

Late comeback...Guillermo de Pena scores to complete Moca's comeback against Grenades

Back in Cibao, Sainvilus' side brushed aside group strugglers Ouanaminthe from Haiti 4-1 with Correa and Edipo Rodriguez, who had only recently returned from a spell in Spain with Palencia, both on the scoresheet.

The margin of victory proved crucial for Cibao as Moca also won all three games subsequent to their opening stalemate. Port of Spain were edged out 3-2 after a stoppage-time goal from Haitian midfielder Clifford Thomas. Ouanaminthe were then beaten 3-1, but Moca had to come from behind in struggling past Grenades 2-1 despite having home advantage to finish in second place with defender Guillermo de Pena scoring the winner.

The dual qualification bore out a decision for the LDF to go full-time a decade ago with none of the other three sides in Group B even registering a victory.

In Group A, Jamaica had three out of the five sides so were virtually guaranteed some success and Cavalier duly won a tighter group. But with the other two Jamaican sides – Mount Pleasant and Arnett Gardens – taking the bottom places, it was overall a poor return for the Caribbean island whose national team qualified for the 1998 World Cup finals.

Cavalier's opening 2-0 victory over Mount Pleasant proved crucial. Mount Pleasant had topped the Jamaica Premier League table in 2023-24 only to lose to Cavalier on penalties in the play-off, but the Caribbean Cup victory was easier as first-half goals from Chris Ainsworth and Shaquille Stein went unanswered.

> The dual qualification bore out a decision for the Dominican league to go full-time a decade ago

Stein was on target in Cavalier's second game as the Jamaicans made short work of Trinidad & Tobago's Police, who had been losing finalists in the 1991

Update

Impressive... Edipo Rodriguez celebrates scoring for Cibao in the group stage

CONCACAF Champions Cup. Police did recover to beat – and virtually eliminate – Arnett Gardens in their next game.

Arnett Gardens had qualified after winning the second-tier Caribbean Club Shield earlier this year alongside losing finalists Grenades, and Warner Brown cancelled out Joevin Jones' opener for Police.

Ezekiel Kesar scored the winner in the 84th minute, but the standard of the TT Premier Football League has dropped compared to some Caribbean rivals and Police failed to win another game.

The other semi-final spot was taken by Haiti's Real Hope, who upset Cavalier in the third round of matches. Cavalier's Dwayne Atkinson hit his third goal in two games after just four minutes, but goals from Rikanel Chery and Steeve Mondestin kept the top of Group A wide open.

Real Hope had been held by Police in their opener and dropped two more points in a goalless draw in their next game with Arnett Gardens, who were then drubbed 4-1 by Cavalier.

This was enough to win the group and Jamaica could have had a second side in the semi-finals, but Real Hope beat Mount Pleasant with two goals from Angelo Exilus to secure second place.

The qualification was a rare moment of success for football on Haiti, which remains gripped by domestic unrest, and Real Hope join the other three qualifiers in contesting the two legged semi-finals at the end of October ahead of a two-legged final in late November/early December.

Upset...Real Hope shock the Jamaican sides in Group A

Basque Country

STEVE MENARY

Dreams of a Basque national team

The Basque Country's football federation remains as determined as ever to have its national team recognised

After a four-year gap, the return of the Basque Country's representative team earlier this year looks set to be regular with the Euskadiko Futbol Federakundea (EFF) looking for more international matches.

Like Catalonia, the Basque Country has fielded a national side since the 1930s but games have been infrequent with just two games during the 36-year reign of General Franco in Spain until his death in 1975. The latest hiatus was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic; a 2-1 victory against Costa Rica, played behind closed doors in Eibar in November 2020, was the last game before Jagoba Arrasate took charge of a 1-1 draw with Uruguay in March this year.

"We haven't played for a while until this last game because it's not easy to find rivals," explains EFF sporting director Mikel De Gregorio. "The league calendars are becoming busier and the number of qualifying matches for national teams is increasing, so the possibilities are reduced for those of us who do not yet have official national team status.

"We are working to play at least two games with our men's and women's senior teams, although we would like to be able to play two games with each one – one at home and one as a visitor."

ABOVE: Back in action...Alvaro Djalo celebrates scoring in the Basque Country national team's first game in four years

The Uruguay game was played in Bilbao at Athletic Club's San Mames, with the home side's winger Alvaro Djalo opening the scoring just before half-time. Arrasate then made six half-time changes – much to the annoyance of visiting coach Marcelo Bielsa, who was expecting a maximum of five – and Lazio's Matias Vecino equalised soon after.

***Euskadi*...fans hold up Basque flags during the March friendly with Uruguay**

Before the game, the EFF president reiterated a suggestion that official acceptance was the aim, and De Gregorio says this remains the case.

"Our goal is to be a team recognised by FIFA and to be able to compete in official international championships," adds De Gregorio. "To achieve a status like that of Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

"To do so, we want to demonstrate that in terms of football we are capable of competing with any team. This would add to the existing demand in society to achieve this and for the necessary changes to occur at the political level so that we can compete in official championships."

The Basque side is drawn not just from the region's three La Liga sides – Athletic, Real Sociedad and Deportivo Alaves – but also other top-flight clubs such as Girona, whose midfielder Ivan Martin played against Uruguay, and Udinese where Oier Zarraga plies his trade. Spain's Euro 2024-winning squad featured two players – Dani Vivian and Mikel Oyarzabal – who have won Basque caps in the past, while Ghana winger Inaki Williams played twice for the representative side.

The quality is there but too many obstacles remain. At its last congress in Bangkok earlier this year, FIFA quietly adopted a new rule saying that all new members need to be recognised by the United Nations.

> "Our goal is to be a team recognised by FIFA and to...achieve a status like that of Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland"
>
> Basque Football Federation sporting director Mikel De Gregorio

The EFF is working with The Union of Basque Sports Federations to achieve international recognition, but as UEFA already had the same rule in place regarding UN recognition, even acceptance by European football's governing body is highly unlikely. This makes the friendly fixtures even more important in terms of supporting Basque identity at a wider level.

De Gregorio says: "The support of the international community would be of great help and that is why we want to play games as visitors as well. We have been working on [our next matches] for some time and we hope to be able to close some of the options as soon as possible."

Tales from the 211

Exploring the weird and wonderful world of football across FIFA's 211 member nations

BRYNE INVITE SPECTATORS TO BRING THEIR TRACTORS

Norwegian second-tier outfit Bryne are best-known to most European football aficionados for being Erling Haaland's hometown club, but they are now attracting attention on social media for a different reason.

In a nod to their agricultural roots, Bryne are inviting spectators to bring their tractors – there is space for up to ten at the ground – to home games, park them by the side of the pitch and watch the team's promotion push from the comfort of their vehicles.

The tractor ticket has mistakenly been labelled as a VIP option online but actually costs a bargain 250 Norwegian Krone (£18) per vehicle and permits entry for one driver and up to four passengers, who can then decide how they want to watch the game. Sofas perched high up in the air on the bucket of the tractor have become a regular feature at recent home games, while a group of adventurous supporters even watched the match against Moss from a hot tub.

Tractor boys ...Bryne pride themselves on their agricultural roots *Credit: Bryne FK*

VATICAN-THEMED CLUB CHASE PROMOTION IN PERU

"Football isn't a game, nor a sport. It's a religion," the legendary Diego Maradona once said. And in the Peruvian second division, that is quite literally the case. Founded in 2015, Juan Pablo II College from the northern coastal city of Chongoyape is a club that is named after Pope John Paul II (who served as head of the Catholic Church from 1978 to 2005), has a picture of the man himself on its badge and even has a Vatican-themed kit designed in the yellow and white flag colours of the world's smallest sovereign state.

But the club are by no means a gimmick. Having gained promotion by winning a fiery match against Diablos Rojos (Red Devils) in last season's Copa Peru – a misnomer as it is not a national cup, but rather a competition where the best-performing teams earn a place in the second division. In October, Juan Pablo II College took on fellow second-tier side Comerciantes in a two-legged play-off for the chance to earn a second successive promotion to Peru's top flight.

WELSH CLUBS EYE ROUTE TO EUROPE

Four Welsh clubs that play in the English football pyramid – Cardiff City, Swansea City, Wrexham and Newport County – have proposed a plan that would see them enter their senior teams into the Welsh League Cup for the chance to represent Wales in the UEFA Conference League.

They argue the move would "drive improvement for the whole Welsh football ecosystem", but critics say that clubs currently in the Welsh football pyramid would stand little chance of winning the competition and qualifying for Europe if the change is implemented.

The situation would not be entirely unprecedented: Vaduz of Liechtenstein play in the Swiss second tier but have previously qualified for Europe by winning the Liechtenstein Cup. The difference is that Vaduz cannot qualify through the Swiss pyramid – even if they become champions of Switzerland – whereas the Welsh quartet can book a continental spot through the English system, as Swansea City did when they won the English Football League Cup in 2013.

Lee Wingate

COMING UP...

Arkadag v Maziya
AFC Challenge League, October 26
Founded by former Turkmenistan president Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov in 2023, Arkadag have won all 57 of their domestic games to date. Their AFC debut against Maldivians Maziya may prove a tougher test.

Baltika Kaliningrad v Khabarovsk
Russian First League, November 2
In the world's most long-distance league match, Khabarovsk will travel over 7,000km to the exclave of Kaliningrad – a journey that would take around 120 hours to drive.

Liechtenstein v San Marino
UEFA Nations League, November 18
San Marino recently won their first-ever competitive game, beating Liechtenstein who responded by beating Hong Kong in October to end their own winless streak. Who will win the rematch?

History makers...San Marino beat Liechtenstein 1-0

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PREMIER LEAGUE 2024-2025

ARSENAL

GOALKEEPERS

22 David **RAYA** (Spa) (29) 15.09.95
32 **NETO** (Bra) (35) 19.07.89
36 Tommy **SETFORD** (18) 13.03.06

DEFENDERS

2 William **SALIBA** (Fra) (23) 24.03.01
3 Kieran **TIERNEY** (Sco) (27) 05.06.97
4 Ben **WHITE** (27) 08.10.97
6 **GABRIEL** (Bra) (26) 19.12.97
12 Jurrien **TIMBER** (Ned) (23) 17.06.01
15 Jakub **KIWIOR** (Pol) (24) 15.02.00
17 Oleksandr **ZINCHENKO** (Ukr) (27) 15.12.96
18 Takehiro **TOMIYASU** (Jpn) (25) 05.11.98
33 Riccardo **CALAFIORI** (Ita) (22) 19.05.02
76 Ayden **HEAVEN** (18) 22.09.06

MIDFIELDERS

5 Thomas **PARTEY** (Gha) (31) 13.06.93
8 Martin **ODEGAARD** (Nor) (25) 17.12.98
20 **JORGINHO** (Ita) (32) 20.12.91
23 Mikel **MERINO** (Spa) (28) 22.06.96
41 Declan **RICE** (25) 14.01.99
49 Myles **LEWIS-SKELLY** (18) 26.09.06
53 Ethan **NWANERI** (17) 21.03.07

FORWARDS

7 Bukayo **SAKA** (23) 05.09.01
9 **GABRIEL JESUS** (Bra) (27) 03.04.97
11 Gabriel **MARTINELLI** (Bra) (23) 18.06.01
19 Leandro **TROSSARD** (Bel) (29) 04.12.94
29 Kai **HAVERTZ** (Ger) (25) 11.06.99
30 Raheem **STERLING** (29) 08.12.94

COACH

Mikel **ARTETA** (Spa) (41) 26.03.82

ASTON VILLA

GOALKEEPERS

18 Joe **GAUCI** (Aus) (24) 04.07.00
23 Emiliano **MARTINEZ** (Arg) (32) 02.09.92
25 Robin **OLSEN** (Swe) (34) 08.01.90

DEFENDERS

2 Matty **CASH** (Pol) (27) 07.08.97
3 **DIEGO CARLOS** (Bra) (31) 15.03.93
4 Ezri **KONSA** (27) 23.10.97
5 Tyrone **MINGS** (31) 13.03.93
12 Lucas **DIGNE** (Fra) (31) 20.07.93
14 Pau **TORRES** (Spa) (27) 16.01.97
20 Kosta **NEDELJKOVIC** (Srb) (18) 16.12.05
22 Ian **MAATSEN** (Ned) (22) 10.03.02
26 Lamare **BOGARDE** (Ned) (20) 05.01.04
30 Kourtney **HAUSE** (29) 16.07.95

MIDFIELDERS

6 Ross **BARKLEY** (30) 05.12.93
7 John **McGINN** (Sco) (30) 18.10.94
8 Youri **TIELEMANS** (Bel) (27) 07.05.97
10 Emiliano **BUENDIA** (Arg) (27) 25.12.96
24 Amadou **ONANA** (Bel) (23) 16.08.01
27 Morgan **ROGERS** (22) 26.07.02
41 Jacob **RAMSEY** (23) 28.05.01
44 Boubacar **KAMARA** (Fra) (24) 23.11.99

FORWARDS

9 Jhon **DURAN** (Col) (20) 13.12.03
11 Ollie **WATKINS** (28) 30.12.95
19 Jaden **PHILOGENE** (22) 08.02.02
31 Leon **BAILEY** (Jam) (27) 09.08.97

COACH

Unai **EMERY** (Spa) (52) 03.11.71

BOURNEMOUTH

GOALKEEPERS

13 **KEPA** Arrizabalaga (Spa) (30) 03.10.94
40 Will **DENNIS** (24) 10.07.00
42 Mark **TRAVERS** (Irl) (25) 18.05.99

DEFENDERS

2 Dean **HUIJSEN** (Spa) (19) 14.04.05
3 Milos **KERKEZ** (Hun) (20) 07.11.03
5 Marcos **SENESI** (Arg) (27) 10.05.97
15 Adam **SMITH** (33) 29.04.91
22 Julian **ARAUJO** (Mex) (23) 13.08.01
23 James **HILL** (22) 10.01.02
27 Ilya **ZABARNYI** (Ukr) (22) 01.09.02
37 Max **AARONS** (24) 04.01.20

MIDFIELDERS

4 Lewis **COOK** (27) 03.02.97
7 David **BROOKS** (Wal) (27) 08.07.97
8 Alex **SCOTT** (21) 21.08.03
10 Ryan **CHRISTIE** (Sco) (29) 22.02.95
12 Tyler **ADAMS** (USA) (25) 14.02.99
16 Marcus **TAVERNIER** (25) 22.03.99
29 Philip **BILLING** (Den) (28) 11.06.96

FORWARDS

9 **EVANILSON** (Bra) (25) 06.10.99
11 Dango **OUATTARA** (Bfa) (22) 11.02.02
17 Luis **SINISTERRA** (Col) (25) 17.06.99
19 Justin **KLUIVERT** (Ned) (25) 05.05.99
24 Antoine **SEMENYO** (Gha) (24) 07.01.00
26 Enes **UNAL** (Tur) (27) 10.05.97

COACH

Andoni **IRAOLA** (Spa) (42) 22.06.82

BRENTFORD

GOALKEEPERS

1 Mark **FLEKKEN** (Ned) (31) 13.06.93
12 Hakon **VALDIMARSSON** (Isl) (23) 13.10.01
13 Matthew **COX** (21) 02.05.03

DEFENDERS

2 Aaron **HICKEY** (Sco) (22) 10.06.02
3 Rico **HENRY** (27) 08.07.97
4 Sepp **VAN DEN BERG** (Ned) (22) 20.12.01
5 Ethan **PINNOCK** (Jam) (31) 29.05.93
16 Ben **MEE** (35) 21.09.89
20 Kristoffer **AJER** (Nor) (26) 17.04.98
21 Jayden **MEGHOMA** (18) 28.06.06
22 Nathan **COLLINS** (Irl) (23) 30.04.01
30 Mads **ROERSLEV** (Den) (25) 24.06.99
36 **KIM** Ji-soo (Kor) (19) 24.12.04

MIDFIELDERS

6 Christian **NORGAARD** (Den) (30) 10.03.94
8 Mathias **JENSEN** (Den) (28) 01.01.96
10 Josh **DASILVA** (26) 23.10.98
14 Fabio **CARVALHO** (Por) (22) 30.08.02
18 Yehor **YARMOLIUK** (Ukr) (20) 01.03.04
23 Keane **LEWIS-POTTER** (23) 22.02.01
24 Mikkel **DAMSGAARD** (Den) (24) 03.07.00
26 Yunus **KONAK** (Tur) (18) 10.01.06
27 Vitaly **JANELT** (Ger) (26) 10.05.98
28 Ryan **TREVITT** (21) 12.03.03
32 Paris **MAGHOMA** (23) 08.05.01

FORWARDS

7 Kevin **SCHADE** (Ger) (22) 27.11.01
9 **IGOR THIAGO** (Bra) (23) 26.06.01
11 Yoane **WISSA** (Cod) (28) 03.09.96
19 Bryan **MBUEMO** (Cmr) (25) 07.08.99
39 **GUSTAVO NUNES** (Bra) (18) 20.11.05

COACH

Thomas **FRANK** (Den) (51) 09.10.73

BRIGHTON

GOALKEEPERS

1 Bart **VERBRUGGEN** (Ned) (22) 18.08.02
23 Jason **STEELE** (34) 18.08.90
38 Killian **CAHILL** (Irl) (20) 03.11.03

DEFENDERS

2 Tariq **LAMPTEY** (Gha) (24) 30.09.00
3 **IGOR JULIO** (Bra) (26) 07.02.98
4 Adam **WEBSTER** (29) 04.01.95
5 Lewis **DUNK** (32) 21.11.91
24 Ferdi **KADIOGLU** (Tur) (25) 07.10.99
29 Jan Paul **VAN HECKE** (Ned) (24) 08.06.00
30 Pervis **ESTUPINAN** (Ecu) (26) 21.01.98
34 Joel **VELTMAN** (Ned) (32) 15.01.92
47 Imari **SAMUELS** (21) 05.02.03

MIDFIELDERS

6 James **MILNER** (38) 04.01.86
7 Solly **MARCH** (30) 20.07.94
8 Brajan **GRUDA** (Ger) (20) 31.05.04
15 Jakub **MODER** (Pol) (25) 07.04.99
20 Carlos **BALEBA** (Cmr) (20) 03.01.04
26 Yasin **AYARI** (Swe) (21) 06.10.03
27 Mats **WIEFFER** (Ned) (24) 16.11.99
33 Matt **O'RILEY** (Den) (23) 21.11.00
41 Jack **HINSHELWOOD** (19) 11.04.05

FORWARDS

9 **JOAO PEDRO** (Bra) (23) 26.09.01
10 Julio **ENCISO** (Par) (20) 23.01.04
11 Simon **ADINGRA** (Civ) (22) 01.01.02
14 Georginio **RUTTER** (Fra) (22) 20.04.02
17 Yankuba **MINTEH** (Gam) (20) 22.07.04
18 Danny **WELBECK** (33) 26.11.90
22 Kaoru **MITOMA** (Jpn) (27) 20.05.97
28 Evan **FERGUSON** (Irl) (20) 19.10.04

COACH

Fabian **HURZELER** (Ger) (31) 26.02.93

CHELSEA

GOALKEEPERS

1 Robert **SANCHEZ** (Spa) (26) 18.11.97
12 Filip **JORGENSEN** (Den) (22) 16.04.02
13 Marcus **BETTINELLI** (32) 24.05.92
47 Lucas **BERGSTROM** (Fin) (22) 05.09.02

DEFENDERS

2 Axel **DISASI** (Fra) (26) 11.03.98
3 Marc **CUCURELLA** (Spa) (26) 22.07.98
4 Tosin **ADARABIOYO** (27) 24.09.97
5 Benoit **BADIASHILE** (Fra) (23) 26.03.01
6 Levi **COLWILL** (21) 26.02.03
21 Ben **CHILWELL** (27) 21.12.96
24 Reece **JAMES** (24) 08.12.99
27 Malo **GUSTO** (Fra) (21) 19.04.03
29 Wesley **FOFANA** (Fra) (23) 17.12.00

MIDFIELDERS

8 Enzo **FERNANDEZ** (Arg) (23) 17.01.01
17 Carney **CHUKWUEMEKA** (21) 20.10.03
22 Kiernan **DEWSBURY-HALL** (26) 06.09.98
25 Moises **CAICEDO** (Ecu) (22) 02.11.01
31 Cesare **CASADEI** (Ita) (21) 10.01.03
37 Omari **KELLYMAN** (19) 15.09.05
40 Renato **VEIGA** (Por) (21) 29.07.03
45 Romeo **LAVIA** (Bel) (20) 06.01.04

FORWARDS

7 Pedro **NETO** (Por) (24) 09.03.00
10 Mykhailo **MUDRYK** (Ukr) (23) 05.01.01
11 Noni **MADUEKE** (22) 10.03.02
14 **JOAO FELIX** (Por) (24) 10.11.99
15 Nicolas **JACKSON** (Sen) (23) 20.06.01
18 Christopher **NKUNKU** (Fra) (26) 14.11.97
19 Jadon **SANCHO** (24) 25.03.00
20 Cole **PALMER** (22) 06.05.02
38 Marc **GUIU** (Spa) (18) 04.01.06

COACH

Enzo **MARESCA** (Ita) (44) 10.02.80

CRYSTAL PALACE

GOALKEEPERS

1 Dean **HENDERSON** (27) 12.03.97
30 Matt **TURNER** (USA) (30) 24.06.94
31 Remi **MATTHEWS** (30) 10.02.94

DEFENDERS

2 Joel **WARD** (34) 29.10.89
3 Tyrick **MITCHELL** (25) 01.09.99
4 Rob **HOLDING** (29) 20.09.95
5 Maxence **LACROIX** (Fra) (24) 06.04.00
6 Marc **GUEHI** (24) 13.07.00
12 Daniel **MUNOZ** (Col) (28) 26.05.96
17 Nathaniel **CLYNE** (33) 05.04.91
26 Chris **RICHARDS** (USA) (24) 28.03.00
27 Trevoh **CHALOBAH** (25) 05.07.99
34 Chadi **RIAD** (Mar) (21) 17.06.03

MIDFIELDERS

8 Jefferson **LERMA** (Col) (30) 25.10.94
10 Eberechi **EZE** (26) 29.06.98
15 Jeffrey **SCHLUPP** (Gha) (31) 23.12.92
18 Daichi **KAMADA** (Jpn) (28) 05.08.96
19 Will **HUGHES** (29) 17.04.95
20 Adam **WHARTON** (20) 06.02.04
28 Cheick **DOUCOURE** (Mli) (24) 08.01.00
42 Kaden **RODNEY** (20) 07.10.04
55 Justin **DEVENNY** (Nir) (21) 11.10.03
64 Asher **AGBINONE** (19) 28.09.05

FORWARDS

7 Ismaila **SARR** (Sen) (26) 25.02.98
9 Eddie **NKETIAH** (25) 30.05.99
11 **MATHEUS FRANCA** (Bra) (20) 01.04.04
14 Jean-Philippe **MATETA** (Fra) (27) 28.06.97
46 Franco **UMEH-CHIBUEZE** (Irl) (19) 26.01.05

COACH

Oliver **GLASNER** (Aut) (50) 28.08.74

EVERTON

GOALKEEPERS

1 Jordan **PICKFORD** (30) 07.03.94
12 Joao **VIRGINIA** (Por) (25) 10.10.99
31 Asmir **BEGOVIC** (Bih) (37) 20.06.87

DEFENDERS

2 Nathan **PATTERSON** (Sco) (23) 16.10.01
5 Michael **KEANE** (31) 11.01.93
6 James **TARKOWSKI** (31) 19.11.92
15 Jake **O'BRIEN** (Irl) (23) 15.05.01
18 Ashley **YOUNG** (39) 09.07.85
19 Vitaly **MYKOLENKO** (Ukr) (25) 29.05.99
23 Seamus **COLEMAN** (Irl) (36) 11.10.88
32 Jarrad **BRANTHWAITE** (22) 27.06.02

MIDFIELDERS

7 Dwight **McNEIL** (24) 22.11.99
8 Orel **MANGALA** (Bel) (26) 18.03.98
11 Jack **HARRISON** (27) 20.11.96
16 Abdoulaye **DOUCOURE** (Mli) (31) 01.01.93
27 Idrissa **GANA GUEYE** (Sen) (35) 26.09.89
29 Jesper **LINDSTROM** (Den) (24) 29.02.00
37 James **GARNER** (23) 13.03.01
42 Tim **IROEGBUNAM** (21) 30.06.03

FORWARDS

9 Dominic **CALVERT-LEWIN** (27) 16.03.97
10 Iliman **NDIAYE** (Sen) (24) 06.03.00
14 **BETO** (Por) (26) 31.01.98
17 Youssef **CHERMITI** (Por) (20) 24.05.04
22 Armando **BROJA** (Alb) (23) 10.09.01

COACH

Sean **DYCHE** (53) 28.06.71

FULHAM

GOALKEEPERS

1 Bernd **LENO** (Ger) (32) 04.02.92
23 Steven **BENDA** (Ger) (26) 01.10.98

DEFENDERS

2 Kenny **TETE** (Ned) (29) 09.10.95
3 Calvin **BASSEY** (Nga) (24) 31.12.99
5 Joachim **ANDERSEN** (Den) (28) 31.05.96
15 Jorge **CUENCA** (Spa) (24) 17.11.99
21 Timothy **CASTAGNE** (Bel) (28) 05.12.95
30 Ryan **SESSEGNON** (24) 18.05.00
31 Issa **DIOP** (Fra) (27) 09.01.97
33 Antonee **ROBINSON** (USA) (27) 08.08.97

MIDFIELDERS

6 Harrison **REED** (29) 27.01.95
8 Harry **WILSON** (Wal) (27) 22.03.97
10 Tom **CAIRNEY** (Sco) (33) 20.01.91
16 Sander **BERGE** (Nor) (26) 14.02.98
17 Alex **IWOBI** (Nga) (28) 03.05.96
18 Andreas **PEREIRA** (Bra) (28) 01.01.96
20 Sasa **LUKIC** (Srb) (28) 13.08.96
32 Emile **SMITH ROWE** (24) 28.07.00

FORWARDS

7 Raul **JIMENEZ** (Mex) (33) 05.05.91
9 Rodrigo **MUNIZ** (Bra) (23) 04.04.01
11 Adama **TRAORE** (Spa) (28) 25.01.96
12 **CARLOS VINICIUS** (Bra) (29) 25.03.95
19 Reiss **NELSON** (24) 10.12.99

COACH

Marco **SILVA** (Por) (47) 12.07.77

IPSWICH TOWN

GOALKEEPERS

1 Arijanet **MURIC** (Kos) (25) 07.11.98
13 Cieran **SLICKER** (Sco) (22) 15.09.02
28 Christian **WALTON** (28) 09.11.95

DEFENDERS

2 Harry **CLARKE** (23) 02.03.01
3 Leif **DAVIS** (24) 31.12.99
6 Luke **WOOLFENDEN** (26) 21.10.98
15 Cameron **BURGESS** (Aus) (29) 21.10.95
18 Ben **JOHNSON** (24) 24.01.00
22 Conor **TOWNSEND** (31) 04.03.93
24 Jacob **GREAVES** (24) 12.09.00
26 Dara **O'SHEA** (Irl) (25) 04.03.99
40 Axel **TUANZEBE** (Cod) (26) 14.11.97

MIDFIELDERS

5 Sam **MORSY** (Egy) (33) 10.09.91
7 Wes **BURNS** (Wal) (29) 23.11.94
8 Kalvin **PHILLIPS** (28) 02.12.95
12 Jens **CAJUSTE** (Swe) (25) 10.08.99
14 Jack **TAYLOR** (Irl) (26) 23.06.98
25 Massimo **LUONGO** (Aus) (32) 25.09.92

FORWARDS

10 Conor **CHAPLIN** (27) 16.02.97
16 Ali **AL HAMADI** (Irq) (22) 01.03.02
19 Liam **DELAP** (21) 08.02.03
20 Omari **HUTCHINSON** (20) 30.10.03
21 Chiedozie **OGBENE** (Irl) (27) 01.05.97
23 Sammie **SZMODICS** (Irl) (29) 24.09.95
27 George **HIRST** (25) 15.02.99
33 Nathan **BROADHEAD** (Wal) (26) 05.04.98
47 Jack **CLARKE** (23) 23.11.00

COACH

Kieran **McKENNA** (Nir) (38) 14.05.86

LEICESTER CITY

GOALKEEPERS
1 Danny **WARD** (Wal) (31) 22.06.93
30 Mads **HERMANSEN** (Den) (24) 11.07.00
31 Daniel **IVERSEN** (Den) (27) 19.07.97
41 Jakub **STOLARCZYK** (Pol) (23) 19.12.00

DEFENDERS
2 James **JUSTIN** (26) 23.02.98
3 Wout **FAES** (Bel) (26) 03.04.98
4 Conor **COADY** (31) 25.02.93
5 Caleb **OKOLI** (Ita) (23) 13.07.01
16 Victor **KRISTIANSEN** (Den) (21) 16.12.02
21 Ricardo **PEREIRA** (Por) (31) 06.10.93
23 Jannik **VESTERGAARD** (Den) (32) 03.08.92
33 Luke **THOMAS** (23) 10.06.01

MIDFIELDERS
6 Wilfred **NDIDI** (Nga) (27) 16.12.96
8 Harry **WINKS** (28) 02.02.96
11 Bilal **EL KHANNOUSS** (Mar) (20) 10.05.04
17 Hamza **CHOUDHURY** (26) 01.10.97
22 Oliver **SKIPP** (24) 16.09.00
24 Boubakary **SOUMARE** (Fra) (25) 27.02.99
34 Michael **GOLDING** (18) 23.05.06
37 Will **ALVES** (19) 04.05.05
40 Facundo **BUONANOTTE** (Arg) (19) 23.12.04

FORWARDS
7 Abdul **FATAWU** (Gha) (20) 08.03.04
9 Jamie **VARDY** (37) 11.01.87
10 Stephy **MAVIDIDI** (26) 31.05.98
14 Bobby **DECORDOVA REID** (Jam) (31) 02.02.93
18 Jordan **AYEW** (Gha) (33) 11.09.91
20 Patson **DAKA** (Zam) (26) 09.10.98
27 Odsonne **EDOUARD** (Fra) (26) 16.01.98
35 Kasey **McATEER** (Irl) (22) 22.11.01

COACH
Steve **COOPER** (Wal) (44) 10.12.79

LIVERPOOL

GOALKEEPERS
1 **ALISSON** (Bra) (32) 02.10.92
56 Vitezslav **JAROS** (Cze) (23) 23.07.01
62 Caoimhin **KELLEHER** (Irl) (25) 23.11.98

DEFENDERS
2 Joe **GOMEZ** (27) 23.05.87
4 Virgil **VAN DIJK** (Ned) (33) 08.07.91
5 Ibrahima **KONATE** (Fra) (25) 25.05.99
21 Kostas **TSIMIKAS** (Gre) (28) 12.05.96
26 Andy **ROBERTSON** (Sco) (30) 11.03.94
66 Trent **ALEXANDER-ARNOLD** (25) 07.10.98
78 Jarell **QUANSAH** (21) 29.01.03
84 Conor **BRADLEY** (Nir) (21) 09.07.03

MIDFIELDERS
3 Wataru **ENDO** (Jpn) (31) 09.02.93
8 Dominik **SZOBOSZLAI** (Hun) (24) 25.10.00
10 Alexis **MAC ALLISTER** (Arg) (25) 24.12.98
17 Curtis **JONES** (23) 30.01.01
19 Harvey **ELLIOTT** (21) 04.04.03
38 Ryan **GRAVENBERCH** (Ned) (22) 16.05.02
80 Tyler **MORTON** (21) 31.10.02

FORWARDS
7 Luis **DIAZ** (Col) (27) 13.01.97
9 Darwin **NUNEZ** (Uru) (25) 24.06.99
11 Mohamed **SALAH** (Egy) (32) 15.06.92
14 Fedrico **CHIESA** (Ita) (26) 25.10.97
18 Cody **GAKPO** (Ned) (25) 07.05.99
20 Diogo **JOTA** (Por) (27) 04.12.96

COACH
Arne **SLOT** (Ned) (46) 17.09.78

MANCHESTER CITY

GOALKEEPERS
18 Stefan **ORTEGA** (Ger) (31) 06.11.92
31 **EDERSON** (Bra) (31) 17.08.93
33 Scott **CARSON** (39) 03.09.85

DEFENDERS
2 Kyle **WALKER** (34) 28.05.90
3 Ruben **DIAS** (Por) (27) 14.05.97
5 John **STONES** (30) 28.05.94
6 Nathan **AKE** (Ned) (29) 18.02.95
24 Josko **GVARDIOL** (Cro) (22) 23.01.02
25 Manuel **AKANJI** (Sui) (29) 19.07.95
82 Rico **LEWIS** (19) 21.11.04
97 Josh **WILSON-ESBRAND** (21) 26.12.02

MIDFIELDERS
8 Mateo **KOVACIC** (Cro) (30) 06.05.94
16 **RODRI** (Spa) (28) 22.06.96
17 Kevin **DE BRUYNE** (Bel) (33) 28.06.91
19 Ilkay **GUNDOGAN** (Ger) (34) 24.10.90
20 Bernardo **SILVA** (Por) (30) 10.08.94
27 Matheus **NUNES** (Por) (26) 27.08.98
87 James **McATEE** (22) 18.10.02

FORWARDS
9 Erling **HAALAND** (Nor) (24) 21.07.00
10 Jack **GREALISH** (29) 10.09.95
11 Jeremy **DOKU** (Bel) (22) 27.05.02
26 **SAVINHO** (Bra) (20) 10.04.04
47 Phil **FODEN** (24) 28.05.00
52 Oscar **BOBB** (Nor) (21) 12.07.03

COACH
Pep **GUARDIOLA** (Spa) (53) 18.01.71

MANCHESTER UTD

GOALKEEPERS
1 Altay **BAYINDIR** (Tur) (26) 14.04.98
22 Tom **HEATON** (38) 15.04.86
24 Andre **ONANA** (Cmr) (28) 02.04.96

DEFENDERS
2 Victor **LINDELOF** (Swe) (30) 17.07.94
3 Noussair **MAZRAOUI** (Mar) (26) 14.11.97
4 Matthijs **DE LIGT** (Ned) (25) 12.08.99
5 Harry **MAGUIRE** (31) 05.03.93
6 Lisandro **MARTINEZ** (Arg) (26) 18.01.98
12 Tyrell **MALACIA** (Ned) (25) 17.08.99
15 Leny **YORO** (Fra) (19) 13.10.05
20 Diogo **DALOT** (Por) (25) 18.03.99
23 Luke **SHAW** (29) 12.07.95
35 Jonny **EVANS** (Nir) (36) 03.01.88
41 Harry **AMASS** (17) 16.03.07

MIDFIELDERS
7 Mason **MOUNT** (25) 10.01.99
8 Bruno **FERNANDES** (Por) (30) 08.09.94
14 Christian **ERIKSEN** (Den) (32) 14.02.92
18 **CASEMIRO** (Bra) (32) 23.02.92
25 Manuel **UGARTE** (Uru) (23) 11.04.01
37 Kobbie **MAINOO** (19) 19.04.05
43 Toby **COLLYER** (20) 03.01.04
44 Daniel **GORE** (20) 26.09.04

FORWARDS
9 Rasmus **HOJLUND** (Den) (21) 04.02.03
10 Marcus **RASHFORD** (26) 31.10.97
11 Joshua **ZIRKZEE** (Ned) (23) 22.05.01
16 **AMAD** Diallo (Civ) (22) 11.07.02
17 Alejandro **GARNACHO** (Arg) (20) 01.07.04
21 **ANTONY** (Bra) (24) 24.04.00
36 Ethan **WHEATLEY** (18) 20.01.06

COACH
Erik **TEN HAG** (Ned) (54) 02.02.70

NEWCASTLE UTD

GOALKEEPERS
1 Martin **DUBRAVKA** (Svk) (35) 27.03.92
19 Odysseas **VLACHODIMOS** (Gre) (30) 26.04.94
22 Nick **POPE** (32) 19.04.92
26 John **RUDDY** (37) 24.10.86
29 Mark **GILLESPIE** (32) 24.10.86

DEFENDERS
2 Kieran **TRIPPIER** (33) 19.09.90
4 Sven **BOTMAN** (Ned) (24) 12.01.00
5 Fabian **SCHAR** (Sui) (32) 20.12.91
6 Jamal **LASCELLES** (30) 11.11.93
13 Matt **TARGETT** (29) 18.09.95
17 Emil **KRAFTH** (Swe) (30) 02.08.94
20 Lewis **HALL** (20) 08.09.04
21 Tino **LIVRAMENTO** (21) 12.11.01
25 Lloyd **KELLY** (25) 06.10.98
33 Dan **BURN** (32) 09.05.92
37 Alex **MURPHY** (Irl) (20) 25.06.04

MIDFIELDERS
7 **JOELINTON** (Bra) (28) 14.08.96
8 Sandro **TONALI** (Ita) (24) 08.05.00
28 Joe **WILLOCK** (25) 20.08.99
36 Sean **LONGSTAFF** (26) 30.10.97
39 Bruno **GUIMARAES** (Bra) (26) 17.11.97
40 Joe **WHITE** (24) 01.10.02
67 Lewis **MILEY** (18) 01.05.06

FORWARDS
9 Callum **WILSON** (32) 27.02.92
10 Anthony **GORDON** (23) 24.02.01
11 Harvey **BARNES** (26) 09.12.97
14 Alexander **ISAK** (Swe) (24) 21.09.99
18 William **OSULA** (Den) (21) 04.08.03
23 Jacob **MURPHY** (29) 24.02.95
24 Miguel **ALMIRON** (Par) (30) 10.02.94

COACH
Eddie **HOWE** (46) 29.11.77

NOTT'M FOREST

GOALKEEPERS
26 Matz **SELS** (Bel) (32) 26.02.92
33 Carlos **MIGUEL** (Bra) (26) 09.10.98

DEFENDERS
4 **MORATO** (Bra) (23) 30.06.01
5 **MURILLO** (Bra) (22) 04.07.02
7 Neco **WILLIAMS** (Wal) (23) 13.04.01
12 Andrew **OMOBAMIDELE** (Irl) (22) 23.06.02
15 Harry **TOFFOLO** (29) 19.08.95
17 Eric **DA SILVA MOREIRA** (Ger) (18) 03.05.06
19 Alex **MORENO** (Spa) (31) 08.06.93
30 Willy **BOLY** (Civ) (33) 03.02.91
31 Nikola **MILENKOVIC** (Srb) (27) 12.10.97
34 Ola **AINA** (Nga) (28) 08.10.96
44 Zach **ABBOTT** (18) 13.05.06

MIDFIELDERS
6 Ibrahim **SANGARE** (Civ) (26) 02.12.97
8 Elliot **ANDERSON** (21) 06.11.02
10 Morgan **GIBBS-WHITE** (24) 27.01.00
16 Nicolas **DOMINGUEZ** (Arg) (26) 28.06.98
18 James **WARD-PROWSE** (29) 01.11.94
22 Ryan **YATES** (26) 21.11.97
28 **DANILO** (Bra) (23) 29.04.01

FORWARDS
9 Taiwo **AWONIYI** (Nga) (27) 12.08.97
11 Chris **WOOD** (Nzl) (32) 07.12.91
14 Callum **HUDSON-ODOI** (23) 07.11.00
20 Jota **SILVA** (Por) (25) 01.08.99
21 Anthony **ELANGA** (Swe) (22) 27.04.02
24 Ramon **SOSA** (Par) (25) 31.08.99
25 Emmanuel **DENNIS** (Nga) (26) 15.11.97

COACH
Nuno **ESPIRITO SANTO** (Por) (50) 25.01.74

SOUTHAMPTON

GOALKEEPERS
1 Alex **McCARTHY** (34) 03.12.89
13 Joe **LUMLEY** (29) 15.02.95
30 Aaron **RAMSDALE** (26) 14.05.98
31 Gavin **BAZUNU** (Irl) (22) 20.02.02

DEFENDERS
2 Kyle **WALKER-PETERS** (27) 13.04.97
3 Ryan **MANNING** (Irl) (28) 14.06.96
5 Jack **STEPHENS** (30) 27.01.94
6 Taylor **HARWOOD-BELLIS** (22) 30.01.02
12 Ronnie **EDWARDS** (21) 28.03.03
14 James **BREE** (26) 11.12.97
15 Nathan **WOOD** (22) 31.05.02
16 Yukinari **SUGAWARA** (Jpn) (24) 28.06.00
21 Charlie **TAYLOR** (31) 18.09.93
28 Juan **LARIOS** (Spa) (20) 12.01.04
35 Jan **BEDNAREK** (Pol) (28) 12.04.96
37 Armel **BELLA-KOTCHAP** (Ger) (22) 11.12.01

MIDFIELDERS
4 Flynn **DOWNES** (25) 20.01.99
7 Joe **ARIBO** (Nga) (28) 21.07.96
8 Will **SMALLBONE** (Irl) (24) 21.02.00
10 Adam **LALLANA** (36) 10.04.88
18 Matheus **FERNANDES** (Por) (20) 10.07.04
24 Ryan **FRASER** (Sco) (30) 24.02.94
26 Lesley **UGOCHUKWU** (Fra) (20) 26.03.04
33 Tyler **DIBLING** (18) 17.02.06

FORWARDS
9 Adam **ARMSTRONG** (27) 10.02.97
11 Ross **STEWART** (Sco) (28) 11.07.96
17 Ben **BRERETON DIAZ** (Chi) (25) 18.04.99
19 Cameron **ARCHER** (22) 09.12.01
20 Kamaldeen **SULEMANA** (Gha) (22) 12.02.02
22 Maxwel **CORNET** (Civ) (28) 27.09.96
27 Samuel **AMO-AMEYAW** (18) 18.07.06
32 Paul **ONUACHU** (Nga) (30) 28.05.94

COACH
Russell **MARTIN** (Sco) (38) 04.01.86

TOTTENHAM

GOALKEEPERS
1 Guglielmo **VICARIO** (Ita) (28) 07.10.96
20 Fraser **FORSTER** (36) 17.03.88
40 Brandon **AUSTIN** (USA) (25) 08.01.99
41 Alfie **WHITEMAN** (26) 02.10.98

DEFENDERS
3 Sergio **REGUILON** (Spa) (27) 16.12.96
6 Radu **DRAGUSIN** (Rom) (22) 03.02.02
13 Destiny **UDOGIE** (Ita) (21) 28.11.02
17 Cristian **ROMERO** (Arg) (26) 27.04.98
23 Pedro **PORRO** (Spa) (25) 12.09.99
24 Djed **SPENCE** (24) 09.08.00
33 Ben **DAVIES** (Wal) (31) 24.04.93
37 Micky **VAN DE VEN** (Ned) (23) 19.04.01

MIDFIELDERS
8 Yves **BISSOUMA** (Mli) (28) 30.08.96
10 James **MADDISON** (27) 23.11.96
14 Archie **GRAY** (18) 12.03.06
15 Lucas **BERGVALL** (Swe) (18) 02.02.06
21 Dejan **KULUSEVSKI** (Swe) (24) 25.04.00
29 Pape Matar **SARR** (Sen) (22) 14.09.02
30 Rodrigo **BENTANCUR** (Uru) (27) 25.06.97

FORWARDS
7 **SON** Heung-min (Kor) (32) 08.07.92
9 **RICHARLISON** (Bra) (27) 10.05.97
16 Timo **WERNER** (Ger) (28) 06.03.96
19 Dominic **SOLANKE** (27) 14.09.97
22 Brennan **JOHNSON** (Wal) (23) 23.04.01
28 Wilson **ODOBERT** (Fra) (19) 28.11.04

COACH
Ange **POSTECOGLOU** (Aus) (59) 27.08.65

WEST HAM UTD

GOALKEEPERS
1 Lukasz **FABIANSKI** (Pol) (39) 18.04.85
21 Wes **FODERINGHAM** (33) 14.01.91
23 Alphonse **AREOLA** (Fra) (31) 27.02.93

DEFENDERS
3 Aaron **CRESWELL** (34) 15.12.89
5 Vladimir **COUFAL** (Cze) (32) 22.08.92
15 Konstantinos **MAVROPANOS** (Gre) (26) 11.12.97
25 Jean-Clair **TODIBO** (Fra) (24) 30.12.99
26 Max **KILMAN** (27) 23.05.97
29 Aaron **WAN-BISSAKA** (26) 26.11.97
33 **EMERSON** (Ita) (30) 03.08.94

MIDFIELDERS
4 Carlos **SOLER** (Spa) (27) 02.01.97
10 Lucas **PAQUETA** (Bra) (27) 27.08.97
14 Mohammed **KUDUS** (Gha) (24) 02.08.00
19 Edson **ALVAREZ** (Mex) (27) 24.10.97
24 Guido **RODRIGUEZ** (Arg) (30) 12.04.94
28 Tomas **SOUCEK** (Cze) (29) 27.02.95
39 Andy **IRVING** (Sco) (24) 13.05.00

FORWARDS
7 Crysencio **SUMMERVILLE** (Ned) (22) 30.10.01
9 Michail **ANTONIO** (Jam) (34) 28.03.90
11 Niclas **FULLKRUG** (Ger) (31) 09.02.93
17 **LUIS GUILHERME** (Bra) (18) 09.02.06
18 Danny **INGS** (32) 23.07.92
20 Jarrod **BOWEN** (27) 20.12.96

COACH
Julen **LOPETEGUI** (Spa) (58) 28.08.66

WOLVES

GOALKEEPERS
1 Jose **SA** (Por) (31) 17.01.93
25 Daniel **BENTLEY** (31) 13.07.93
31 Sam **JOHNSTONE** (31) 25.03.93
40 Tom **KING** (Wal) (29) 09.03.95

DEFENDERS
2 Matt **DOHERTY** (Irl) (32) 16.01.92
3 Rayan **AIT-NOURI** (Alg) (23) 06.06.01
4 Santiago **BUENO** (Uru) (25) 09.11.98
14 Yerson **MOSQUERA** (Col) (23) 02.05.01
15 Craig **DAWSON** (34) 06.04.90
22 Nelson **SEMEDO** (Por) (30) 16.11.93
24 **TOTI** (Por) (25) 16.01.99
33 Bastien **MEUPIYOU** (Fra) (18) 19.03.06
37 Pedro **LIMA** (Bra) (18) 01.07.06

MIDFIELDERS
5 Mario **LEMINA** (Gab) (31) 01.09.93
6 Boubacar **TRAORE** (Mli) (23) 20.08.01
7 **ANDRE** (Bra) (23) 16.07.01
8 **JOAO GOMES** (Bra) (23) 12.02.01
20 Tommy **DOYLE** (23) 17.10.01
27 Jean-Ricner **BELLEGARDE** (Fra) (26) 27.06.98
34 Luke **CUNDLE** (22) 26.04.02

FORWARDS
9 Jorgen **STRAND LARSEN** (Nor) (24) 06.02.00
10 **MATHEUS CUNHA** (Bra) (25) 27.05.99
11 **HWANG** Hee-chan (Kor) (28) 26.01.96
18 Sasa **KALAJDZIC** (Aut) (27) 07.07.97
19 Rodrigo **GOMES** (Por) (21) 07.07.01
21 Pablo **SARABIA** (Spa) (32) 11.05.92
26 Carlos **FORBS** (Por) (20) 19.03.04
29 Goncalo **GUEDES** (Por) (27) 29.11.96
30 Enso **GONZALEZ** (Par) (19) 20.01.05

COACH
Gary **O'NEIL** (41) 18.05.83

(ages as of 25/10.24)

LA LIGA 2024-25

ALAVES

GOALKEEPERS
1 Antonio **SIVERA** (28) 11.08.96
13 Jesus **OWONO** (Egg) (23) 01.03.01
31 Adrian **RODRIGUEZ** (Arg) (23) 12.12.00

DEFENDERS
3 Manu **SANCHEZ** (24) 24.08.00
4 Aleksandar **SEDLAR** (Srb) (32) 13.12.91
5 Abdelkabir **ABQAR** (Mar) (25) 10.03.99
12 Santiago **MOURINO** (Uru) (22) 13.02.02
14 Facundo **TENAGLIA** (Arg) (28) 21.02.96
16 Hugo **NOVOA** (21) 24.01.03
22 Moussa **DIARRA** (Mli) (23) 10.11.00
34 Eneko **ORTIZ** (21) 26.05.03
36 Adrian **PICA** (22) 25.04.02

MIDFIELDERS
6 Ander **GUEVARA** (27) 07.07.97
8 Antonio **BLANCO** (24) 23.07.00
18 Jon **GURIDI** (29) 28.02.95
19 **STOICHKOV** (30) 05.11.93
20 Luka **ROMERO** (Arg) (19) 18.11.04
23 Carlos **BENAVIDEZ** (Uru) (26) 30.03.98
24 Joan **JORDAN** (30) 06.07.94
28 Ander **SANCHEZ** (20) 24.01.04
30 Tomas **MENDES** (19) 21.11.04

FORWARDS
7 Carlos **VICENTE** (25) 23.04.99
9 Asier **VILLALIBRE** (27) 30.09.97
10 Tomas **CONECHNY** (Arg) (26) 30.03.98
11 Toni **MARTINEZ** (27) 30.06.97
15 Carlos **MARTIN** (22) 22.04.02
17 Kike **GARCIA** (34) 25.11.89
21 Abde **REBBACH** (Alg) (26) 11.08.98
37 Julen **LARTITEGI** (21) 29.09.03

COACH
Luis **GARCIA** (51) 01.12.72

ATHLETIC CLUB

GOALKEEPERS
1 Unai **SIMON** (27) 11.06.97
13 Julen **AGIRREZABALA** (23) 26.12.00
26 Alex **PADILLA** (Mex) (21) 01.09.03
34 Oier **GASTESI** (20) 30.10.03

DEFENDERS
2 Andoni **GOROSABEL** (28) 04.08.96
3 Dani **VIVIAN** (25) 05.07.99
4 Aitor **PAREDES** (24) 29.04.00
5 Yeray **ALVAREZ** (29) 24.01.95
14 Unai **NUNEZ** (27) 30.01.97
15 Inigo **LEKUE** (31) 04.05.93
17 Yuri **BERCHICHE** (34) 10.02.90
18 Oscar **DE MARCOS** (35) 14.04.89
32 Adama **BOIRO** (22) 22.06.02

MIDFIELDERS
6 Mikel **VESGA** (31) 08.04.93
8 Oihan **SANCET** (24) 25.04.00
16 Inigo **RUIZ DE GALARRETA** (31) 06.08.93
20 Unai **GOMEZ** (21) 25.05.03
21 Ander **HERRERA** (35) 14.08.89
23 Mikel **JAUREGIZAR** (20) 13.11.03
24 Benat **PRADOS** (23) 08.02.01

FORWARDS
7 Alex **BERENGUER** (29) 04.07.95
9 Inaki **WILLIAMS** (Gha) (30) 15.06.94
10 Nico **WILLIAMS** (22) 12.07.02
11 Alvaro **DJALO** (25) 16.08.99
12 Gorka **GURUZETA** (28) 12.09.96
19 Javi **MARTON** (25) 06.05.99
22 Nico **SERRANO** (21) 05.03.03

COACH
Ernesto **VALVERDE** (60) 09.02.64

ATLETICO MADRID

GOALKEEPERS
1 Juan **MUSSO** (Arg) (30) 06.05.94
13 Jan **OBLAK** (Svn) (31) 07.01.93
31 Antonio **GOMIS** (21) 20.05.03
33 Alejandro **ITURBE** (21) 02.09.03

DEFENDERS
2 Jose Maria **GIMENEZ** (Uru) (29) 20.01.95
3 Cesar **AZPILICUETA** (35) 28.08.89
15 Clement **LENGLET** (Fra) (29) 17.06.95
16 Nahuel **MOLINA** (Arg) (26) 06.04.98
20 Axel **WITSEL** (Bel) (35) 12.01.89
21 Javi **GALAN** (29) 19.11.94
23 Reinildo **MANDAVA** (Moz) (30) 21.01.94
24 Robin **LE NORMAND** (27) 11.11.96
27 Ilias **KOSTIS** (Gre) (21) 27.02.03

MIDFIELDERS
4 Conor **GALLAGHER** (Eng) (24) 06.02.00
5 Rodrigo **DE PAUL** (Arg) (30) 24.05.94
6 **KOKE** (32) 08.01.92
8 Pablo **BARRIOS** (21) 15.06.03
11 Thomas **LEMAR** (Fra) (28) 12.11.95
12 Samuel **LINO** (Bra) (24) 23.12.99
14 Marcos **LLORENTE** (29) 30.01.95
29 Javier **SERRANO** (21) 16.01.03

FORWARDS
7 Antoine **GRIEZMANN** (Fra) (33) 21.03.91
9 Alexander **SORLOTH** (Nor) (28) 05.12.95
10 Angel **CORREA** (Arg) (29) 09.03.95
17 Rodrigo **RIQUELME** (24) 02.04.00
19 Julian **ALVAREZ** (Arg) (24) 31.01.00
22 Giuliano **SIMEONE** (Arg) (21) 18.12.02
30 Salim **EL JEBARI** (Mar) (20) 05.02.04

COACH
Diego **SIMEONE** (Arg) (54) 28.04.70

BARCELONA

GOALKEEPERS
1 Marc-Andre **TER STEGEN** (Ger) (32) 30.04.92
13 Inaki **PENA** (25) 02.03.99
25 Wojciech **SZCZESNY** (Pol) (34) 18.04.90
26 Ander **ASTRALAGA** (20) 03.03.04
31 Diego **KOCHEN** (USA) (18) 19.03.06

DEFENDERS
2 Pau **CUBARSI** (17) 22.01.07
3 Alejandro **BALDE** (21) 18.10.03
4 Ronald **ARAUJO** (Uru) (25) 07.03.99
5 Inigo **MARTINEZ** (33) 17.05.91
15 Andreas **CHRISTENSEN** (Den) (28) 10.04.96
23 Jules **KOUNDE** (Fra) (25) 12.11.98
24 Eric **GARCIA** (23) 09.01.01
32 Hector **FORT** (18) 02.08.06
35 Gerard **MARTIN** (22) 26.02.02
36 Sergi **DOMINGUEZ** (19) 01.04.05
39 Andres **CUENCA** (17) 11.06.07

MIDFIELDERS
6 **GAVI** (20) 05.08.04
8 **PEDRI** (21) 25.11.02
14 Pablo **TORRE** (21) 03.04.03
16 **FERMIN** Lopez (21) 11.05.03
17 Marc **CASADO** (21) 14.09.03
18 Pau **VICTOR** (22) 26.11.01
20 Dani **OLMO** (26) 07.05.98
21 Frenkie **DE JONG** (Ned) (27) 12.05.97
28 Marc **BERNAL** (17) 26.05.07
41 Guille **FERNANDEZ** (16) 18.06.08

FORWARDS
7 Ferran **TORRES** (24) 29.02.00
9 Robert **LEWANDOWSKI** (Pol) (36) 21.08.88
10 Ansu **FATI** (21) 31.10.02
11 **RAPHINHA** (Bra) (27) 14.12.96
19 Lamine **YAMAL** (17) 13.07.07
42 Toni **FERNANDEZ** (16) 15.07.08

COACH
Hansi **FLICK** (Ger) (59) 24.02.65

CELTA VIGO

GOALKEEPERS
1 Ivan **VILLAR** (27) 09.07.97
13 Vicente **GUAITA** (37) 10.01.87
26 Marc **VIDAL** (24) 14.02.00
27 Cesar **FERNANDEZ** (20) 28.09.04

DEFENDERS
2 Carl **STARFELT** (Swe) (29) 01.06.95
3 Oscar **MINGUEZA** (25) 13.05.99
5 Sergio **CARREIRA** (24) 13.10.00
15 Joseph **AIDOO** (Gha) (29) 29.09.95
20 Marcos **ALONSO** (33) 28.12.90
21 Mihailo **RISTIC** (Srb) (28) 31.10.95
22 Javier **MANQUILLO** (30) 05.05.94
24 Carlos **DOMINGUEZ** (23) 11.02.01
32 Javi **RODRIGUEZ** (21) 26.06.03

MIDFIELDERS
6 Ilaix **MORIBA** (Gui) (21) 19.01.03
8 Fran **BELTRAN** (25) 03.02.99
11 Franco **CERVI** (Arg) (30) 26.05.94
14 Luca **DE LA TORRE** (USA) (26) 23.05.98
16 **JAILSON** (Bra) (29) 07.09.95
19 Williot **SWEDBERG** (Swe) (20) 01.02.04
25 Damian **RODRIGUEZ** (21) 17.03.03
30 Hugo **ALVAREZ** (21) 02.07.03
33 Hugo **SOTELO** (20) 19.12.03

FORWARDS
7 Borja **IGLESIAS** (31) 17.01.93
9 Anastasios **DOUVIKAS** (Gre) (25) 02.08.99
10 Iago **ASPAS** (37) 01.08.87
12 Alfon **GONZALEZ** (25) 04.05.99
17 Jonathan **BAMBA** (Civ) (28) 26.03.96
18 Pablo **DURAN** (23) 25.05.01
23 Tadeo **ALLENDE** (Arg) (25) 20.02.99

COACH
Claudio **GIRALDEZ** (36) 24.02.88

ESPANYOL

GOALKEEPERS
1 Joan **GARCIA** (23) 04.05.01
13 Fernando **PACHECO** (32) 18.05.92
33 Angel **FORTUNO** (23) 05.10.01

DEFENDERS
3 Sergi **GOMEZ** (32) 28.03.92
4 Marash **KUMBULLA** (Alb) (24) 08.02.00
5 Fernando **CALERO** (29) 14.09.95
6 Leandro **CABRERA** (Uru) (33) 17.06.91
12 Alvaro **TEJERO** (28) 20.07.96
14 Brian **OLIVAN** (30) 01.04.94
22 Carlos **ROMERO** (22) 29.10.01
23 Omar **EL HILALI** (Mar) (21) 12.09.03
27 Jose Luis **CATALA** (20) 16.08.04

MIDFIELDERS
8 Edu **EXPOSITO** (28) 01.08.96
10 Pol **LOZANO** (25) 06.10.99
15 Jose **GRAGERA** (24) 14.05.00
18 Alvaro **AGUADO** (28) 01.05.96
19 Salvi **SANCHEZ** (33) 30.03.91
20 Alex **KRAL** (Cze) (26) 19.05.98
35 Rafel **BAUZA** (19) 30.01.05

FORWARDS
7 Javier **PUADO** (26) 25.05.98
9 Alejo **VELIZ** (Arg) (21) 19.09.03
11 Pere **MILLA** (32) 23.09.92
16 Walid **CHEDDIRA** (Mar) (26) 22.01.98
17 Jofre **CARRERAS** (23) 17.06.01
24 Irvin **CARDONA** (Fra) (27) 08.08.97
31 Antoniu **ROCA** (22) 09.05.02
34 Omar **SADIK** (Mar) (20) 22.03.04
37 Naci **UNUVAR** (Tur) (21) 13.06.03

COACH
Manolo **GONZALEZ** (45) 14.01.79

GETAFE

GOALKEEPERS
1 Jiri **LETACEK** (Cze) (25) 09.01.99
13 David **SORIA** (31) 04.04.93
35 Djordjije **MEDENICA** (Cze) (17) 17.11.06
40 Diego **FERRER** (17) 01.01.07

DEFENDERS
2 Dakonam **DJENE** (Tog) (32) 31.12.91
3 Fabrizio **ANGILERI** (Arg) (30) 15.03.94
4 Juan **BERROCAL** (25) 05.02.99
15 Omar **ALDERETE** (Par) (27) 26.12.96
16 Diego **RICO** (31) 23.02.93
21 Juan **IGLESIAS** (26) 03.07.98
22 Domingos **DUARTE** (Por) (29) 10.03.95
27 Nabil **ABERDIN** (Fra) (22) 23.08.02
30 Gorka **RIVERA** (20) 01.08.04
33 Guillem **TRILLA** (21) 04.02.03
34 David **ARGUELLES** (22) 10.01.02

MIDFIELDERS
5 Luis **MILLA** (30) 07.10.94
6 Christantus **UCHE** (Nga) (21) 19.05.03
7 Alex **SOLA** (25) 09.06.99
8 Mauro **ARAMBARRI** (Uru) (29) 30.09.95
11 Carles **ALENA** (26) 05.01.98
20 Yellu **SANTIAGO** (20) 25.05.04
26 Alberto **RISCO** (19) 30.08.05
31 John **PATRICK** (Irl) (21) 24.09.03

FORWARDS
9 Borja **MAYORAL** (27) 05.04.97
10 Bertug **YILDIRIM** (Tur) (22) 12.07.02
17 Carles **PEREZ** (26) 16.02.98
18 Alvaro **RODRIGUEZ** (Uru) (20) 14.07.04
19 Peter **GONZALEZ** (Dom) (22) 25.07.02
29 **COBA** da Costa (22) 26.07.02
36 Abdoulaye **KEITA** (22) 01.09.02

COACH
Jose **BORDALAS** (60) 05.03.64

GIRONA

GOALKEEPERS
1 Juan **CARLOS** (36) 20.01.88
13 Paulo **GAZZANIGA** (Arg) (32) 02.01.92
25 Pau **LOPEZ** (29) 13.12.94

DEFENDERS
3 Miguel **GUTIERREZ** (23) 27.07.01
4 Arnau **MARTINEZ** (21) 25.04.03
5 David **LOPEZ** (35) 09.10.89
15 **JUANPE** (33) 30.04.91
16 Alejandro **FRANCES** (22) 01.08.02
17 Daley **BLIND** (Ned) (34) 09.03.90
18 Ladislav **KREJCI** (Cze) (25) 20.04.99

MIDFIELDERS
6 Donny **VAN DE BEEK** (Ned) (27) 18.04.97
14 Oriol **ROMEU** (33) 24.09.91
21 Yangel **HERRERA** (Ven) (26) 07.01.98
22 Jhon **SOLIS** (Col) (20) 03.10.04
23 Ivan **MARTIN** (25) 14.02.99
27 Gabriel **MISEHOUY** (Ned) (19) 18.07.05

FORWARDS
7 Cristhian **STUANI** (Uru) (38) 12.10.86
8 Viktor **TSYHANKOV** (Ukr) (26) 15.11.97
9 Abel **RUIZ** (24) 28.01.00
10 Yaser **ASPRILLA** (Col) (20) 19.11.03
11 Arnaut **DANJUMA** (Ned) (27) 31.01.97
19 Bojan **MIOVSKI** (Mkd) (25) 24.06.99
20 Bryan **GIL** (23) 11.02.01
24 **PORTU** (32) 21.05.92
37 Raul **MARTINEZ** (22) 23.02.02

COACH
MICHEL (48) 30.10.75

LAS PALMAS

GOALKEEPERS
1 Jasper **CILLESSEN** (Ned) (35) 22.04.89
13 Dinko **HORKAS** (Cro) (25) 10.03.99
25 Alvaro **VALLES** (27) 25.07.97
30 Alvaro **KILLANE** (Arg) (19) 14.12.04
31 Victor **PUIG** (19) 15.08.05

DEFENDERS
2 **MARVIN** (24) 03.07.00
3 Mika **MARMOL** (23) 01.07.01
4 Alex **SUAREZ** (31) 18.03.93
15 Scott **McKENNA** (Sco) (27) 12.11.96
22 Daley **SINKGRAVEN** (Ned) (29) 04.07.95
23 Alex **MUNOZ** (30) 30.07.94
27 Valentin **PEZZOLESI** (17) 16.04.07
28 Juanma **HERZOG** (20) 13.05.04

MIDFIELDERS
5 Javi **MUNOZ** (29) 28.02.95
6 **FABIO** Gonzalez (27) 12.02.97
8 Jose Gomez **CAMPANA** (31) 31.05.93
10 Alberto **MOLEIRO** (21) 30.09.03
12 Enzo **LOIODICE** (Fra) (23) 27.11.00
14 Manu **FUSTER** (27) 22.10.97
18 **VITI** Rozada (27) 16.09.97
20 **KIRIAN** Rodriguez (28) 05.03.96
21 Ivan **GIL** (24) 18.01.00
24 Adnan **JANUZAJ** (Bel) (29) 05.02.95
29 Dario **ESSUGO** (Por) (19) 14.03.05

FORWARDS
7 **PEJINO** (28) 29.07.96
9 Marc **CARDONA** (29) 08.07.95
11 **BENITO** Ramirez (29) 11.07.95
16 Oli **McBURNIE** (Sco) (28) 04.06.96
17 Jaime **MATA** (36) 24.10.88
19 **SANDRO** Ramirez (29) 09.07.95
37 Fabio **SILVA** (Por) (22) 19.07.02

COACH
Luis **CARRION** (45) 07.02.79

LEGANES

GOALKEEPERS
1 Juan **SORIANO** (27) 23.08.97
13 Marko **DMITROVIC** (Srb) (32) 24.01.92
36 Alvaro **ABAJAS** (21) 12.05.03

DEFENDERS
2 Adria **ALTIMIRA** (23) 28.03.01
3 Jorge **SAENZ** (27) 17.11.96
4 Jackson **POROZO** (Ecu) (24) 04.08.00
6 Sergio **GONZALEZ** (32) 20.04.92
12 Valentin **ROSIER** (Fra) (28) 19.08.96
15 Enric **FRANQUESA** (27) 26.02.97
20 Javi **HERNANDEZ** (26) 02.05.98
22 Matija **NASTASIC** (Srb) (31) 28.03.93
34 Joao **URBAEZ** (Dom) (22) 24.07.02

MIDFIELDERS
5 Renato **TAPIA** (Per) (29) 28.07.95
7 **OSCAR** Rodriguez (26) 28.06.98
8 Seydouba **CISSE** (Gui) (23) 10.02.01
14 Darko **BRASANAC** (Srb) (32) 12.02.92
17 Yvan **NEYOU** (Cmr) (27) 03.01.97
21 Roberto **LOPEZ** (24) 24.04.00
24 Julian **CHICCO** (Arg) (26) 13.01.98

FORWARDS
9 **MIGUEL** de la Fuente (25) 03.09.99
10 Dani **RABA** (28) 29.10.95
11 Juan **CRUZ** (24) 25.04.00
18 Sebastien **HALLER** (Civ) (30) 22.06.94
19 Diego **GARCIA** (24) 18.04.00
23 **MUNIR** El Haddadi (Mar) (29) 01.09.95
27 Naim **GARCIA** (22) 11.06.02

COACH
Borja **JIMENEZ** (39) 21.01.85

MALLORCA

GOALKEEPERS
1 Dominik **GREIF** (Svk) (27) 06.04.97
13 Leo **ROMAN** (24) 06.07.00
25 Ivan **CUELLAR** (40) 27.05.84

DEFENDERS
2 Mateu **MOREY** (24) 02.03.00
3 Toni **LATO** (26) 21.11.97
4 Siebe **VAN DER HEYDEN** (Bel) (26) 30.05.98
6 Jose **COPETE** (25) 10.10.99
21 Antonio **RAILLO** (33) 08.10.91
22 Johan **MOJICA** (Col) (32) 21.08.92
23 Pablo **MAFFEO** (Arg) (27) 12.07.97
24 Martin **VALJENT** (Svk) (28) 11.12.95

MIDFIELDERS
5 Omar **MASCARELL** (Egg) (31) 02.02.93
8 Manu **MORLANES** (25) 12.01.99
10 Sergi **DARDER** (30) 22.12.93
12 Samu **COSTA** (Por) (23) 27.11.00
14 Dani **RODRIGUEZ** (36) 06.06.88
16 Valery **FERNANDEZ** (24) 23.11.99
18 Antonio **SANCHEZ** (27) 22.04.97
27 Robert **NAVARRO** (22) 12.04.02
28 Miquel **SALAS** (19) 10.08.05
33 Daniel **LUNA** (Col) (21) 07.05.03

FORWARDS
7 Vedat **MURIQI** (Kos) (30) 24.04.94
9 Abdon **PRATS** (31) 07.12.92
11 Takuma **ASANO** (Jpn) (29) 10.11.94
17 Cyle **LARIN** (Can) (29) 17.04.95
19 Javier **LLABRES** (22) 11.09.02
20 **CHIQUINHO** (Por) (24) 05.02.00
30 Marc **DOMENECH** (17) 01.12.06

COACH
Jagoba **ARRASATE** (46) 22.04.78

OSASUNA

GOALKEEPERS
1 Sergio **HERRERA** (31) 05.06.93
13 Aitor **FERNANDEZ** (33) 03.05.91
31 Pablo **VALENCIA** (23) 16.03.01
32 Dimitrios **STAMATAKIS** (Gre) (21) 23.04.03

DEFENDERS
2 Nacho **VIDAL** (29) 24.01.95
3 Juan **CRUZ** (32) 28.07.92
4 Unai **GARCIA** (32) 03.02.92
5 Jorge **HERRANDO** (23) 28.02.01
12 Jesus **ARESO** (25) 02.07.99
15 Ruben **PENA** (33) 18.07.91
22 Flavien Enzo **BOYOMO** (Cmr) (23) 07.10.01
23 Abel **BRETONES** (24) 21.08.00
24 Alejandro **CATENA** (29) 28.10.94

MIDFIELDERS
6 Lucas **TORRO** (30) 19.07.94
7 Jon **MONCAYOLA** (26) 13.05.98
8 Pablo **IBANEZ** (26) 20.09.98
10 Aimar **OROZ** (22) 27.11.01
14 Ruben **GARCIA** (31) 14.07.93
16 Moi **GOMEZ** (30) 23.06.94
18 Iker **MUNOZ** (22) 05.09.02
20 Jose Manuel **ARNAIZ** (29) 15.04.95
21 Javi **MARTINEZ** (24) 22.12.99

FORWARDS
9 Raul **GARCIA** (23) 03.11.00
11 Kike **BARJA** (27) 01.04.97
17 Ante **BUDIMIR** (Cro) (33) 22.07.91
19 Bryan **ZARAGOZA** (23) 09.09.01
27 Iker **BENITO** (22) 10.08.02
44 Inigo **ARGUIBIDE** (19) 19.04.05

COACH
Vicente **MORENO** (49) 26.10.74

RAYO VALLECANO

GOALKEEPERS
1 Dani **CARDENAS** (27) 28.03.97
13 Augusto **BATALLA** (Arg) (28) 30.04.96

DEFENDERS
2 Andrei **RATIU** (Rom) (26) 20.06.98
3 Pep **CHAVARRIA** (26) 10.04.98
5 Aridane **HERNANDEZ** (35) 23.03.89
16 Abdul **MUMIN** (Gha) (26) 06.06.98
20 Ivan **BALLIU** (Alb) (32) 01.01.92
22 Alfonso **ESPINO** (Uru) (32) 05.01.92
24 Florian **LEJEUNE** (Fra) (33) 20.05.91
26 Marco **DE LAS SIAS** (18) 29.12.05
27 Pelayo **FERNANDEZ** (21) 29.04.03

MIDFIELDERS
4 Pedro **DIAZ** (26) 05.06.98
6 Pathe **CISS** (Sen) (30) 16.03.94
8 Oscar **TREJO** (Arg) (36) 26.04.88
10 **JAMES** Rodriguez (Col) (33) 12.07.91
11 Randy **NTEKA** (Fra) (26) 06.12.97
15 Gerard **GUMBAU** (29) 18.12.94
17 Unai **LOPEZ** (28) 30.10.95
18 Alvaro **GARCIA** (31) 27.10.92
23 Oscar **VALENTIN** (30) 20.08.94
25 Joni **MONTIEL** (26) 03.09.98
29 Diego **MENDEZ** (21) 28.08.03

FORWARDS
7 Isi **PALAZON** (29) 27.12.94
9 Raul **DE TOMAS** (30) 17.10.94
12 Sergi **GUARDIOLA** (33) 29.05.91
14 Sergio **CAMELLO** (23) 10.02.01
19 Jorge **DE FRUTOS** (27) 20.02.97
21 Adrian **EMBARBA** (32) 07.05.92
28 Etienne **ETO'O** (Cmr) (22) 18.08.02

COACH
Inigo **PEREZ** (36) 18.01.88

REAL BETIS

GOALKEEPERS
1 Rui **SILVA** (Por) (30) 07.02.94
13 **ADRIAN** (37) 03.01.87
25 Fran **VIEITES** (25) 07.05.99

DEFENDERS
2 Hector **BELLERIN** (29) 19.03.95
3 Diego **LLORENTE** (31) 16.08.93
5 Marc **BARTRA** (33) 15.01.91
6 **NATAN** (Bra) (23) 06.02.01
12 Ricardo **RODRIGUEZ** (Sui) (32) 25.08.92
15 Romain **PERRAUD** (Fra) (27) 22.09.97
23 Youssouf **SABALY** (Sen) (31) 05.03.93
32 Nobel **MENDY** (Sen) (20) 16.08.04
43 Lucas **ALCAZAR** (22) 11.07.02

MIDFIELDERS
4 Johnny **CARDOSO** (USA) (23) 20.09.01
14 **WILLIAM** Carvalho (Por) (32) 07.04.92
16 Sergi **ALTIMIRA** (23) 25.08.01
18 Pablo **FORNALS** (28) 22.02.96
19 Iker **LOSADA** (23) 01.08.01
20 Giovani **LO CELSO** (Arg) (28) 09.04.96
21 Marc **ROCA** (27) 26.11.96
22 **ISCO** (32) 21.04.92
36 Jesus **RODRIGUEZ** (18) 21.11.05
46 Mateo **FLORES** (20) 07.04.04

FORWARDS
7 **JUANMI** (31) 20.05.93
8 **VITOR ROQUE** (Bra) (19) 28.02.05
9 Chimy **AVILA** (Arg) (30) 06.02.94
10 Abde **EZZALZOULI** (Mar) (22) 17.12.01
11 Cedric **BAKAMBU** (Cod) (33) 11.04.91
24 Aitor **RUIBAL** (28) 22.03.96
38 Assane **DIAO** (19) 07.09.05

COACH
Manuel **PELLEGRINI** (Chi) (71) 16.09.53

REAL MADRID

GOALKEEPERS
1 Thibaut **COURTOIS** (Bel) (32) 11.05.92
13 Andriy **LUNIN** (Ukr) (25) 11.02.99
26 Fran **GONZALEZ** (19) 24.06.05
34 Sergio **MESTRE** (19) 13.02.05

DEFENDERS
2 Dani **CARVAJAL** (32) 11.01.92
3 **EDER MILITAO** (Bra) (26) 18.01.98
4 David **ALABA** (Aut) (32) 24.06.92
17 Lucas **VAZQUEZ** (33) 01.07.91
18 Jesus **VALLEJO** (27) 05.01.97
20 Fran **GARCIA** (25) 14.08.99
22 Antonio **RUDIGER** (Ger) (31) 03.03.93
23 Ferland **MENDY** (Fra) (29) 08.06.95
31 Jacobo **RAMON** (19) 06.01.05
38 David **JIMENEZ** (20) 14.03.04

MIDFIELDERS
5 Jude **BELLINGHAM** (Eng) (21) 29.06.03
6 Eduardo **CAMAVINGA** (Fra) (21) 10.11.02
8 Federico **VALVERDE** (Uru) (26) 22.07.98
10 Luka **MODRIC** (Cro) (39) 09.09.85
14 Aurelien **TCHOUAMENI** (Fra) (24) 27.01.00
15 Arda **GULER** (Tur) (19) 25.02.05
19 Dani **CEBALLOS** (28) 07.08.96
21 **BRAHIM** Diaz (Mar) (25) 03.08.99
36 Chema **ANDRES** (19) 25.04.05

FORWARDS
7 **VINICIUS JUNIOR** (Bra) (24) 12.07.00
9 Kylian **MBAPPE** (Fra) (25) 20.12.98
11 **RODRYGO** (Bra) (23) 09.01.01
16 **ENDRICK** (Bra) (18) 21.07.06

COACH
Carlo **ANCELOTTI** (Ita) (65) 10.06.59

REAL SOCIEDAD

GOALKEEPERS
1 Alex **REMIRO** (29) 24.03.95
13 Unai **MARRERO** (23) 09.10.01
35 Egoitz **ARANA** (22) 19.02.02
37 Aitor **FRAGA** (21) 09.03.03

DEFENDERS
2 Alvaro **ODRIOZOLA** (28) 14.12.95
3 Aihen **MUNOZ** (27) 16.08.97
5 Igor **ZUBELDIA** (27) 30.03.97
6 Aritz **ELUSTONDO** (30) 28.03.94
12 Javi **LOPEZ** (22) 25.03.02
17 Sergio **GOMEZ** (24) 04.09.00
18 Hamari **TRAORE** (Mli) (32) 27.01.92
20 Jon **PACHECO** (23) 08.01.01
21 Nayef **AGUERD** (Mar) (28) 30.03.96
26 Jon **ARAMBURU** (Ven) (22) 23.07.02
31 Jon **MARTIN** (18) 23.04.06

MIDFIELDERS
4 Martin **ZUBIMENDI** (25) 02.02.99
8 Arsen **ZAKHARYAN** (Rus) (21) 26.05.03
15 Urko **GONZALEZ DE ZARATE** (23) 20.03.01
16 Jon Ander **OLASAGASTI** (24) 16.08.00
22 Benat **TURRIENTES** (22) 31.01.02
23 Brais **MENDEZ** (27) 07.01.97
24 Luka **SUCIC** (Cro) (22) 08.09.02
25 Jon **MAGUNAZELAIA** (23) 13.07.01
28 Pablo **MARIN** (21) 03.07.03

FORWARDS
7 Ander **BARRENETXEA** (22) 27.12.01
9 Orri **OSKARSSON** (Isl) (20) 29.08.04
10 Mikel **OYARZABAL** (27) 21.04.97
11 Sheraldo **BECKER** (Sur) (29) 09.02.95
14 Takefusa **KUBO** (Jpn) (23) 04.06.01
19 Umar **SADIQ** (Nga) (27) 02.02.97

COACH
Imanol **ALGUACIL** (53) 04.07.71

REAL VALLADOLID

GOALKEEPERS
1 Andre **FERREIRA** (Por) (28) 29.05.96
13 Karl **HEIN** (Est) (22) 13.04.02
26 Arnau **RAFUS** (21) 27.04.03
31 Alvaro **ACEVES** (21) 26.07.03

DEFENDERS
2 Luis **PEREZ** (29) 04.02.95
3 David **TORRES** (21) 05.03.03
5 Javi **SANCHEZ** (27) 14.03.97
6 Cenk **OZKACAR** (Tur) (24) 06.10.00
15 Eray **COMERT** (Sui) (26) 04.02.98
22 Lucas **ROSA** (Bra) (24) 03.04.00
30 Raul **CHASCO** (21) 13.09.03
32 Koke **IGLESIAS** (19) 16.03.05
35 Juma **BAH** (Sle) (18) 11.04.06

MIDFIELDERS
4 Victor **MESEGUER** (25) 09.06.99
8 Kike **PEREZ** (27) 14.02.97
12 Mario **MARTIN** (20) 05.03.04
16 Cesar **DE LA HOZ** (32) 30.03.92
20 Stanko **JURIC** (Cro) (28) 16.08.96
21 Selim **AMALLAH** (Mar) (27) 15.11.96
23 **ANUAR** (Mar) (29) 15.01.95
24 **KENEDY** (Bra) (28) 08.02.96
34 Mario **MAROTO** (20) 28.11.03

FORWARDS
7 Mamadou **SYLLA** (Sen) (30) 20.03.94
9 **MARCOS ANDRE** (Bra) (28) 20.10.96
10 Ivan **SANCHEZ** (32) 23.09.92
11 Raul **MORO** (21) 05.12.02
14 Juanmi **LATASA** (23) 23.03.01
18 Darwin **MACHIS** (Ven) (31) 07.02.93
19 Amath **NDIAYE** (Sen) (28) 16.07.96
28 **CHUKI** (20) 29.04.04

COACH
Paulo **PEZZOLANO** (Uru) (41) 25.04.83

SEVILLA

GOALKEEPERS
1 Alvaro **FERNANDEZ** (26) 13.04.98
13 Orjan **NYLAND** (Nor) (34) 10.09.90
31 Alberto **FLORES** (20) 10.11.03
33 Matias **ARBOL** (22) 12.09.02

DEFENDERS
3 Adria **PEDROSA** (26) 13.05.98
4 Kike **SALAS** (22) 23.04.02
6 Nemanja **GUDELJ** (Srb) (32) 16.11.91
15 Gonzalo **MONTIEL** (Arg) (27) 01.01.97
16 Jesus **NAVAS** (38) 21.11.85
19 Valentin **BARCO** (Arg) (20) 23.07.04
22 Loic **BADE** (Fra) (24) 11.04.00
23 **MARCAO** (Bra) (28) 05.06.96
24 Tanguy **NIANZOU** (Fra) (22) 07.06.02
26 Juanlu **SANCHEZ** (21) 15.08.03
32 Jose Angel **CARMONA** (22) 29.01.02

MIDFIELDERS
8 Pedro **ORTIZ** (24) 19.08.00
12 Albert Sambi **LOKONGA** (Bel) (25) 22.10.99
17 **SAUL** Niguez (29) 21.11.94
18 Lucien **AGOUME** (Fra) (22) 09.02.02
20 Djibril **SOW** (Sui) (27) 06.02.97
28 Manuel **BUENO** (20) 27.07.04
30 Alberto **COLLADO** (19) 16.04.05
37 Pablo **RIVERA** (20) 11.01.04

FORWARDS
7 Isaac **ROMERO** (24) 18.05.00
9 Kelechi **IHEANACHO** (Nga) (28) 03.10.96
10 **SUSO** (30) 19.11.93
11 Dodi **LUKEBAKIO** (Bel) (27) 24.09.97
14 **PEQUE** (22) 04.10.02
21 Chidera **EJUKE** (Nga) (26) 02.01.98
27 Stanis **IDUMBO MUZAMBO** (Bel) (19) 29.06.05
34 Mateo **MEJIA** (Col) (21) 21.03.03

COACH
Garcia **PIMIENTA** (50) 03.08.74

VALENCIA

GOALKEEPERS
1 Jaume **DOMENECH** (33) 05.11.90
13 Stole **DIMITRIEVSKI** (Mkd) (30) 25.12.93
25 Giorgi **MAMARDASHVILI** (Geo) (24) 29.09.00
34 Raul **JIMENEZ** (18) 16.02.06

DEFENDERS
2 Maximiliano **CAUFRIEZ** (Bel) (27) 16.02.97
3 Cristhian **MOSQUERA** (20) 27.06.04
4 Mouctar **DIAKHABY** (Gui) (27) 19.12.96
12 Thierry **CORREIA** (Por) (25) 09.03.99
14 Jose **GAYA** (29) 25.05.95
15 Cesar **TARREGA** (22) 26.02.02
20 Dimitri **FOULQUIER** (Glp) (31) 23.03.93
21 Jesus **VAZQUEZ** (21) 02.01.03
24 Yarek **GASIOROWSKI** (19) 12.01.05
29 Alex **SERRADELL** (22) 14.08.02
38 Iker **CORDOBA** (18) 11.11.05
39 Rodrigo **ABAJAS** (21) 12.05.03

MIDFIELDERS
5 Enzo **BARRENECHEA** (Arg) (23) 22.05.01
6 Hugo **GUILLAMON** (24) 31.01.00
8 Javi **GUERRA** (21) 13.05.03
10 Andre **ALMEIDA** (Por) (24) 30.05.00
18 **PEPELU** (26) 11.08.98
22 Luis **RIOJA** (31) 16.10.93
32 Martin **TEJON** (20) 12.04.04

FORWARDS
7 Sergi **CANOS** (27) 02.02.97
9 Hugo **DURO** (24) 10.11.99
11 Rafa **MIR** (27) 18.06.97
16 Diego **LOPEZ** (22) 13.05.02
17 Dani **GOMEZ** (26) 30.07.98
23 Fran **PEREZ** (22) 09.09.02
27 David **OTORBI** (17) 16.10.07
30 German **VALERA** (22) 16.03.02
42 Warren **MADRIGAL** (Crc) (20) 24.07.04

COACH
Ruben **BARAJA** (49) 11.07.75

VILLARREAL

GOALKEEPERS
1 **JUNIOR REIS** (Bra) (23) 14.01.01
13 Diego **CONDE** (25) 28.10.98
31 Iker **ALVAREZ** (And) (23) 25.07.01

DEFENDERS
2 Logan **COSTA** (Cpv) (23) 01.04.01
3 Raul **ALBIOL** (39) 04.09.85
4 Eric **BAILLY** (Civ) (30) 12.04.94
5 Willy **KAMBWALA** (Fra) (20) 25.08.04
8 Juan **FOYTH** (Arg) (26) 12.01.98
12 Juan **BERNAT** (31) 01.03.93
17 Kiko **FEMENIA** (33) 02.02.91
23 Sergi **CARDONA** (25) 08.07.99
24 Alfonso **PEDRAZA** (28) 09.04.96
26 Pau **NAVARRO** (19) 25.04.05
27 Arnau **SOLA** (21) 04.04.03
28 Antonio **ESPIGARES** (20) 05.09.04

MIDFIELDERS
6 Denis **SUAREZ** (30) 06.01.94
10 Dani **PAREJO** (35) 16.04.89
14 Santi **COMESANA** (28) 05.10.96
16 Alex **BAENA** (23) 20.07.01
18 Pape **GUEYE** (Sen) (25) 24.01.99
20 Ramon **TERRATS** (24) 18.10.00
30 Dani **REQUENA** (20) 12.02.04
36 Karl **ETTA EYONG** (Cmr) (21) 14.10.03

FORWARDS
7 **GERARD** Moreno (32) 07.04.92
11 Ilias **AKHOMACH** (Mar) (20) 16.04.04
15 Thierno **BARRY** (Fra) (22) 21.10.02
19 Nicolas **PEPE** (Civ) (29) 29.05.95
21 **YEREMY** Pino (22) 20.10.02
22 **AYOZE** Perez (31) 29.07.93
33 Pau **CABANES** (19) 17.02.05

COACH
MARCELINO (59) 14.08.65

(ages as of 25/10.24)

Club Football

EUROPE

2024-25 UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Matchday 1

Sep 17 – Bern
Young Boys (Sui) 0
Aston Villa (Eng) 3 (Tielemans 27, Ramsey 38, Onana 86)

Sep 17 – Turin
Juventus (Ita) 3 (Yildiz 21, McKennie 27, Gonzalez 52)
PSV (Ned) 1 (Saibari 90+3)

Sep 17 – Milan
Milan (Ita) 1 (Pulisic 3)
Liverpool (Eng) 3 (Konate 23, Van Dijk 41, Szoboszlai 67)

Sep 17 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 9 (Kane 19 pen, 57, 73 pen, 78 pen, Guerreiro 33, Olise 38, 61, Sane 85, Goretzka 90+2)
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 2 (Petkovic 49, Ogiwara 50)

Sep 17 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 3 (Mbappe 46, Rudiger 83, Endrick 90+5)
Stuttgart (Ger) 1 (Undav 68)

Sep 17 – Lisbon
Sporting (Por) 2 (Gyokeres 38, Debast 65)
Lille (Fra) 0

Sep 18 – Prague
Sparta Prague (Cze) 3 (Kairinen 2, Olatunji 42, Laci 58)
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 0

Sep 18 – Bologna
Bologna (Ita) 0
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 0

Sep 18 – Glasgow
Celtic (Sco) 5 (Scales 17, Furuhashi 47, Engels 56 pen, Maeda 70, Idah 87)
Slovan Bratislava (Cze) 1 (Wimmer 61)

Sep 18 – Brugge
Club Brugge (Bel) 0
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 3 (Gittens 76, 86, Guirassy 90+5 pen)

Sep 18 – Manchester
Manchester City (Eng) 0
Internazionale (Ita) 0

Sep 18 – Paris
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 1 (Gazzaniga 90 og)
Girona (Spa) 0

Sep 19 – Rotterdam
Feyenoord (Ned) 0
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 4 (Wirtz 5, 36, Grimaldo 30, Wellenreuther 45 og)

Sep 19 – Belgrade
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 1 (Milson 86)
Benfica (Por) 2 (Akturkoglu 9, Kokcu 29)

Sep 19 – Monaco
Monaco (Fra) 2 (Aklioucheh 16, Ilenikhena 71)
Barcelona (Spa) 1 (Yamal 28)

Sep 19 – Bergamo
Atalanta (Ita) 0
Arsenal (Eng) 0

Sep 19 – Madrid
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 2 (Griezmann 28, Gimenez 90)
RB Leipzig (Ger) 1 (Sesko 4)

Sep 19 – Guingamp
Brest (Fra) 2 (Magnetti 23, Sima 56)
Sturm Graz (Aut) 1 (Fernandes 45+1 og)

Matchday 2

Oct 1 – Salzburg
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 0
Brest (Fra) 4 (Sima 24, 70, Camara 66, Pereira Lage 75)

Oct 1 – Stuttgart
Stuttgart (Ger) 1 (Millot 7)
Sparta Prague (Cze) 1 (Kairinen 32)

Oct 1 – London
Arsenal (Eng) 2 (Havertz 20, Saka 35)
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 0

Oct 1 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 1 (Boniface 51)
Milan (Ita) 0

Oct 1 – Dortmund
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 7 (Can 7 pen, Adeyemi 11, 29, 42, Guirassy 40 pen, 66, Nmecha 79)
Celtic (Sco) 1 (Maeda 9)

Oct 1 – Barcelona
Barcelona (Spa) 5 (Lewandowski 8, 51, Raphinha 34, Martinez 37, Camara 81 og)
Young Boys (Sui) 0

Oct 1 – Milan
Internazionale (Ita) 4 (Calhanoglu 11, Arnautovic 59, L. Martinez 71, Taremi 81 pen)
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 0

Oct 1 – Eindhoven
PSV (Ned) 1 (Schouten 15)
Sporting (Por) 1 (Braganca 84)

Oct 1 – Bratislava
Slovan Bratislava (Cze) 0
Manchester City (Eng) 4 (Gundogan 8, Foden 15, Haaland 58, McAtee 74)

Oct 2 – Gelsenkirchen
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 0
Atalanta (Ita) 3 (Djimsiti 21, Lookman 44, Bellanova 48)

Oct 2 – Girona
Girona (Spa) 2 (D. Lopez 19, Van de Beek 73)
Feyenoord (Ned) 3 (Herrera 23 og, Milambo 33, Krejci 79 og)

Oct 2 – Birmingham
Aston Villa (Eng) 1 (Duran 79)
Bayern Munich (Ger) 0

Oct 2 – Zagreb
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 2 (Sucic 45+3, Baturina 66)
Monaco (Fra) 2 (Salisu 74, Zakaria 90 pen)

Oct 2 – Liverpool
Liverpool (Eng) 2 (Mac Allister 11, Salah 75)
Bologna (Ita) 0

Oct 2 – Lille
Lille (Fra) 1 (David 45+3 pen)
Real Madrid (Spa) 0

Oct 2 – Leipzig
RB Leipzig (Ger) 2 (Sesko 30, 65 pen)
Juventus (Ita) 3 (Vlahovic 50, 68, Conceicao 82)

Oct 2 – Klagenfurt
Sturm Graz (Aut) 0
Club Brugge (Bel) 1 (Tzolis 23)

Oct 2 – Lisbon
Benfica (Por) 4 (Akturkoglu 13, Di Maria 52 pen, Bah 75, Kokcu 84 pen)
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 0

2024-25 EUROPA LEAGUE

Matchday 1

Sep 25 – Alkmaar
AZ (Ned) 3 (Van Bommel 44, 50, Parrott 74 pen)
Elfsborg (Swe) 2 (Ouma 23, Hedlund 53)

Sep 25 – Bodo
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 3 (Hogh 15, Hauge 40, 62)
Porto (Por) 2 (Omorodion 8, Gul 90)

Sep 25 – Hamburg
Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 0
Lazio (Ita) 3 (Dia 5, 35, Dele-Bashiru 34)

Sep 25 – Herning
Midtjylland (Den) 1 (Osorio 42)
Hoffenheim (Ger) 1 (Moerstedt 90)

Sep 25 – Istanbul
Galatasaray (Tur) 3 (Rahman 48 og, Akgun 75, Icardi 90+5)
PAOK (Gre) 1 (Konstantelias 67)

Sep 25 – Manchester
Manchester United (Eng) 1 (Eriksen 35)
Twente (Ned) 1 (Lammers 68)

Sep 25 – Nice
Nice (Fra) 1 (Rosario 45)
Real Sociedad (Spa) 1 (Barrenetxea 18)

Sep 25 – Razgrad
Ludogorets (Bul) 0
Slavia Prague (Cze) 2 (Jurasek 37, Chytil 65)

Sep 25 – Brussels
Anderlecht (Bel) 2 (Verschaeren 61, Dolberg 66 pen)
Ferencvaros (Hun) 1 (Traore 86)

Sep 26 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce (Tur) 2 (Soyuncu 26, Burgess 82 og)
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 1 (Sykes 90+3)

Sep 26 – Malmo
Malmo (Swe) 0
Rangers (Sco) 2 (Bajrami 1, McCausland 76)

Sep 26 – Amsterdam
Ajax (Ned) 4 (Fitz-Jim 31, Godts 51, 73, Taylor 55)
Besiktas (Tur) 0

Sep 26 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 1 (Dovbyk 32)
Athletic Club (Spa) 1 (Paredes 85)

Sep 26 – Frankfurt
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 3 (Ekitike 38, Dina Ebimbe 62, Kristensen 67)
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 3 (Sulc 41, Adu 86, Jemelka 90+3)

Sep 26 – Bucharest
FCSB (Rou) 4 (Birligea 8, Stefanescu 32, Olaru 58, 69)
RFS (Lva) 1 (Lipuscek 23)

Sep 26 – Lyon
Lyon (Fra) 2 (Cherki 65, Benrahma 71)
Olympiacos (Gre) 0

Sep 26 – Braga
Braga (Por) 2 (Bruma 88, 90+5 pen)
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 1 (Davida 30 pen)

Sep 26 – London
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 3 (Johnson 12, Sarr 52, Solanke 68)
Qarabag (Aze) 0

Matchday 2

Oct 3 – Riga
RFS (Lva) 2 (Ikaunieks 40, Odisharia 55)
Galatasaray (Tur) 2 (Mertens 12, Akgun 38)

Oct 3 – Budapest
Ferencvaros (Hun) 1 (Varga 90)
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 2 (Sarr 23, Johnson 86)

Oct 3 – Belgrade
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 0
Midtjylland (Den) 2 (Franculino 39, Chilufya 89)

Oct 3 – Piraeus
Olympiacos (Gre) 3 (El Kaabi 45, 59, Hezze 53)
Braga (Por) 0

Oct 3 – Baku
Qarabag (Aze) 1 (Juninho 15)
Malmo (Swe) 2 (Botheim 19, 47)

Oct 3 – San Sebastian
Real Sociedad (Spa) 1 (Marin 5)
Anderlecht (Bel) 2 (Vazquez 28, Leoni 39)

Oct 3 – Rome
Lazio (Ita) 4 (Pedro 20, Castellanos 35, 53, Zaccagni 67 pen)
Nice (Fra) 1 (Boga 41)

Oct 3 – Prague
Slavia Prague (Cze) 1 (Chiry 67)
Ajax (Ned) 1 (Van den Boomen 18 pen)

Oct 3 – Sinsheim
Hoffenheim (Ger) 2 (Hlozek 22, 60)
Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 0

Oct 3 – Bilbao
Athletic Club (Spa) 2 (I. Williams 72, Sancet 85)
AZ (Ned) 0

Oct 3 – Istanbul
Besiktas (Tur) 1 (Masuaku 90+3)
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 3 (Marmoush 19 pen, Dina Ebimbe 22, Knauff 82)

Oct 3 – Porto
Porto (Por) 3 (Pepe 27, Omorodion 34, 50)
Manchester United (Eng) 3 (Rashford 7, Hojlund 20, Maguire 90+1)

Oct 3 – Enschede
Twente (Ned) 1 (Vlap 29)
Fenerbahce (Tur) 1 (Tadic 71)

Oct 3 – Plzen
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 0
Ludogorets (Bul) 0

Oct 3 – Boras
Elfsborg (Swe) 1 (Baidoo 44 pen)
Roma (Ita) 0

Oct 3 – Thessaloniki
PAOK (Gre) 0
FCSB (Rou) 1 (Birligea 45+8)

Oct 3 – Brussels
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 0
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 0

Oct 3 – Glasgow
Rangers (Sco) 1 (Lawrence 14)
Lyon (Fra) 4 (Fofana 10, 55, Lacazette 19, 45+1)

2024-25 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Matchday 1

Oct 2 – Istanbul
Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) 1 (Piatek 45+2)
Rapid Vienna (Aut) 2 (Schaub 43, 46)

Oct 2 – Guimaraes
Vitoria Guimaraes (Por) 3 (Samu 7, G. Silva 36, T. Silva 62)
Celje (Svn) 1 (Matko 90+1)

Oct 3 – Heidenheim
Heidenheim (Ger) 2 (Beck 6, Wanner 83)
Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) 1 (Blanco 77)

Oct 3 – Brugge
Cercle Brugge (Bel) 6 (Minda 3, Denkey 25, 43, 54 pen, Magnee 63, 68)
St Gallen (Sui) 2 (Csoboth 58, Mambimbi 81)

Oct 3 – Almaty
Astana (Kaz) 1 (Kazukolovas 15)
TSC Backa Topola (Srb) 0

Oct 3 – Sumgayit
Dinamo Minsk (Blr) 1 (Alfred 21)
Hearts (Sco) 2 (Politevich 37 og, Dhanda 90+4)

Oct 3 – Yerevan
Noah (Arm) 2 (Aias 58, Pinson 76)
Mlada Boleslav (Cze) 0

Oct 3 – Warsaw
Legia Warsaw (Pol) 1 (Kapuadi 23)
Real Betis (Spa) 0

Oct 3 – Molde
Molde (Nor) 3 (Eikrem 51, Brynhildsen 78, Ihler 90+5)
Larne (Nir) 0

Oct 3 – Nicosia
Omonia (Cyp) 4 (Coulibaly 51, Kakoullis 81, 90, Alioum 86)
Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) 0

Oct 3 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 2 (Adli 65, Kean 68)
The New Saints (Wal) 0

Oct 3 – London
Chelsea (Eng) 4 (Veiga 12, Neto 46, Nkunku 63, Dewsbury-Hall 70)
Gent (Bel) 2 (Watanabe 50, Gandelman 90)

Oct 3 – Copenhagen
Copenhagen (Den) 1 (Hatzidiakos 12)
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 2 (Pululu 51, Churlinov 90+7)

Oct 3 – Thun
Lugano (Sui) 3 (Papadopoulos 34, Marques 56, Dos Santos 90+1)
HJK (Fin) 0

Oct 3 – Chisinau
Petrocub Hincesti (And) 1 (Lungu 26 pen)
Pafos (Cyp) 4 (Correia 33, 52, Jaja 37, Name 82)

Oct 3 – Banja Luka
Borac Banja Luka (Bih) 1 (Despotovic 50)
Panathinaikos (Gre) 1 (Bakasetas 11)

Oct 3 – Linz
LASK (Aut) 2 (Berisha 26, Flecker 49)
Djurgarden (Swe) 2 (Priske 58, Nguen 65)

Oct 3 – Dublin
Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 1 (Watts 90+2)
APOEL (Cyp) 1 (Laifis 59)

WORLD

2024 FIFA INTERCONTINENTAL CUP

First Round (African-Asian-Pacific Cup play-off)

Sep 22 – Al Ain
Al Ain (UAE) 6 (Cardoso 6, Gassama 11, Palacios 45+1, Rahimi 78, 90+4, Kaku 90+2)
Auckland City (Nzl) 2 (Lagos 43, Bevan 54)

SOUTH AMERICA

2024 COPA LIBERTADORES

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Sep 17 – Santiago
Colo-Colo (Chi) 1 (Palacios 61)
River Plate (Arg) 1 (Pezzella 43)

Sep 18 – Rio de Janeiro
Fluminense (Bra) 1 (Lima 87)
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 0

Sep 18 – Rio de Janeiro
Botafogo (Bra) 0
Sao Paulo (Bra) 0

Sep 19 – Rio de Janeiro
Flamengo (Bra) 0
Penarol (Uru) 1 (Cabrera 13)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Sep 24 – Buenos Aires
River Plate (Arg) 1 (Colidio 16)
Colo-Colo (Chi) 0
River Plate win 2-1 on aggregate

Sep 25 – Belo Horizonte
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 2 (Deyverson 50, 88)
Fluminense (Bra) 0
Atletico Mineiro win 2-1 on aggregate

Sep 25 – Sao Paulo
Sao Paulo (Bra) 1 (Calleri 87)
Botafogo (Bra) 1 (Almada 15)
1-1 on aggregate. Botafogo win 5-4 on pens

Sep 26 – Montevideo
Penarol (Uru) 0
Flamengo (Bra) 0
Penarol win 1-0 on aggregate

2024 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Sep 17 – Fortaleza
Fortaleza (Bra) 0
Corinthians (Bra) 2 (Coronado 39, Yuri Alberto 90)

Sep 18 – Lanus
Lanus (Arg) 0
Independiente Medellin (Col) 0

Sep 19 – Asuncion
Libertad (Par) 0
Cruzeiro (Bra) 2 (Kaio Jorge 19, Diaz 45+3)

Sep 19 – Curitiba
Athletico Paranaense (Bra) 1 (Joao Cruz 38)
Racing (Arg) 0

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Sep 24 – Sao Paulo
Corinthians (Bra) 3 (Romero 55, Coronado 59, Pedro Henrique 81)
Fortaleza (Bra) 0
Corinthians win 5-0 on aggregate

Sep 25 – Medellin
Independiente Medellin (Col) 1 (Garcia 61)
Lanus (Arg) 1 (Londono 39 og)
1-1 on aggregate. Lanus win 6-5 on pens

Sep 26 – Belo Horizonte
Cruzeiro (Bra) 1 (Kaio Jorge 12)
Libertad (Par) 1 (Santa Cruz 72)
Cruzeiro win 3-1 on aggregate

Sep 26 – Avellaneda
Racing (Arg) 4 (Almendra 1, A. Martinez 23, R. Martinez 42, Martirena 77)
Athletico Paranaense (Bra) 1 (Nikao 47)
Racing win 4-2 on aggregate

AFRICA

2024-25 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Second Qualifying Round

Sep 13-15:
Enugu Rangers (Nga) 1-0 Sagrada Esperanca (Ang); US Monastir (Tun) 1-0 MC Alger (Alg); AS Douanes (Bfa) 1-0 CR Belouizdad (Alg); CBE (Eth) 0-1 Young Africans (Tan); APR (Rwa) 1-1 Pyramids (Egy); Mbabane Swallows (Esw) 0-4 Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA); Maniema Union (Cod) 2-1 Petro Atletico (Ang); Red Arrows (Zam) 0-2 TP Mazembe (Cod); Jwaneng Galaxy (Bot) 0-2 Orlando Pirates (RSA); Djoliba (Mal) 1-0 ASKO Kara (Tog); Al Merrikh (Sud) 2-2 AS FAR (Mar); Gor Mahia (Ken) 0-3 Al Ahly (Egy); Dekedaha (Som) 1-4 Esperance (Tun); Samartex (Gha) 2-2 Raja Casablanca (Mar); Stade d'Abidjan (Civ) 2-0 Milo (Gui); San Pedro (Civ) 2-2 Al Hilal (Sud)

Sep 20-22:
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 1-0 AS Douanes (Bfa) (agg 1-1, *CR Belouizdad win 4-3 on pens*); Al Ahly (Egy) 3-0 Gor Mahia (Ken) (agg 6-0); Esperance (Tun) 8-0 Dekedaha (Som) (agg 12-1); Young Africans (Tan) 6-0 CBE (Eth) (agg 7-0); Pyramids (Egy) 3-1 APR (Rwa) (agg 4-2); Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 4-0 Mbabane Swallows (Esw) (agg 8-0); Petro Atletico (Ang) 0-0 Maniema Union (Cod) (agg 1-2); TP Mazembe (Cod) 2-1 Red Arrows (Zam) (agg 4-1); Orlando Pirates (RSA) 1-0 Jwaneng Galaxy (Bot) (agg 3-0); Raja Casablanca (Mar) 2-0 Samartex (Gha) (agg 4-2); MC Alger (Alg) 2-0 US Monastir (Tun) (agg 2-1); Sagrada Esperanca (Ang) 3-1 Enugu Rangers (Nga) (agg 3-2); ASKO Kara (Tog) 0-1 Djoliba (Mal) (agg 0-2); Milo (Gui) 2-1 Stade d'Abidjan (Civ) (agg 2-3); Al Hilal (Sud) 1-0 San Pedro (Civ) (agg 3-2); AS FAR (Mar) 2-0 Al Merrikh (Sud) (agg 4-2)

2024-25 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Second Qualifying Round

Sep 13-15:
Etoile Filante (Bfa) 0-0 Enyimba (Nga); RC Abidjan (Civ) 0-0 ASC Jaraaf (Sen); Stellenbosch (RSA) 2-0 AS Vita Club (Cod); Nsoatreman (Gha) 0-2 CS Constantine (Alg); Dadje (Ben) 0-2 RS Berkane (Mar); Paynesville (Lbr) 1-0 Stade Malien (Mli); Administration Police (Ken) 0-1 Zamalek (Egy); Stade Tunisien (Tun) 1-0 USM Alger (Alg); Lunda Sul (Ang) 1-0 Sekhukhune United (RSA); Black Bulls (Moz) 1-0 AS Otoho (Cod); ASC Kara (Tog) 2-1 ASEC Abidjan (Civ); Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby) 0-0 Simba (Tan); Al Hilal Benghazi (Lby) 3-2 Al Masry (Egy); Rukinzo (Bdi) 0-1 Sfaxien (Tun); Bravos do Maquis (Ang) 1-0 Saint-Eloi Lupopo (Cod); Orapa United (Bot) 0-1 Dynamos (Zim)

Sep 20-22:
RS Berkane (Mar) 5-0 Dadje (Ben) (agg 7-0); Stade Malien (Mli) 3-1 Paynesville (Lbr) (agg 3-2); Zamalek (Egy) 2-1 Administration Police (Ken) (agg 3-1); Sfaxien (Tun) 1-0 Rukinzo (Bdi) (agg 2-0); Sekhukhune United (RSA) 2-1 Lunda Sul (Ang) (agg 2-2, *Lunda Sul win on away goals*); CS Constantine (Alg) 1-0 Nsoatreman (Gha) (agg 3-0); ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 2-0 ASC Kara (Tog) (agg 3-2); Enyimba (Nga) 0-0 Etoile Filante (Bfa) (agg 0-0, *Enyimba win 3-2 on pens*); ASC Jaraaf (Sen) 3-0 RC Abidjan (Civ) (agg 3-0); USM Alger (Alg) 2-0 Stade Tunisien (Tun) (agg 2-1); Simba (Tan) 3-1 Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby) (agg 3-1); Al Masry (Egy) 3-2 Al Hilal Benghazi (Lby) (agg 5-5, *Al Masry win 5-3 on pens*); AS Vita Club (Cod) 1-1 Stellenbosch (RSA) (agg 1-3); Saint-Eloi Lupopo (Cod) 1-2 Bravos do Maquis (Ang) (agg 1-3); AS Otoho (Cod) 2-1 Black Bulls (Moz) (agg 2-2, *Black Bulls win on away goals*); Dynamos (Zim) 0-1 Orapa United (Bot) (agg 1-1, *Orapa United win 3-1 on pens*)

2024 CAF SUPER CUP

Final

Sep 27 – Riyadh
Al Ahly (Egy) 1 (Abou Ali 44 pen)
Zamalek (Egy) 1 (Mansi 77)
Zamalek win 4-3 on pens

CHAD

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
AS PSI*	26	19	4	3	47	13	61
Foullah Edifice*	25	15	8	2	58	21	53
Renaissance*	26	14	6	6	48	22	48
Aiglons*	26	14	6	6	53	28	48
Elect Sport	26	13	9	4	39	22	48
Gazelle	26	13	5	8	39	31	44
Emat	26	13	5	8	38	36	44
AS Dgssie	26	11	8	7	37	28	41
Algoy	25	8	4	13	32	37	28
Ascot	26	6	8	12	29	39	26
Tourbillon	26	5	5	16	26	55	20
Stars J Talents	26	5	4	17	19	41	19
AS Farcha (R)**	26	3	8	15	24	46	17
Agri-Tchad (R)	26	1	2	23	23	93	5

**Advance to championship round*
***Lost 3-0 to Galactik in the promotion-relegation play-off*

CONCACAF

2024 CENTRAL AMERICAN CUP

Quarter-Finals

Sep 24-26:
Antigua (Gua) 0-0 Saprissa (Crc); Real Esteli (Nca) 2-1 Aguila (Slv); Motagua (Hon) 2-2 Herediano (Crc); Comunicaciones (Gua) 1-2 Alajuelense (Crc)
Oct 1-3:
Saprissa (Crc) 0-3 Antigua (Gua) (agg 0-3); Aguila (Slv) 0-0 Real Esteli (Nca) (agg 1-2); Herediano (Crc) 0-0 Motagua (Hon) (agg 2-2, *Herediano win on away goals*); Alajuelense (Crc) 1-1 Comunicaciones (Gua) (agg 3-2)

2024 CONCACAF CARIBBEAN CUP

Group A

Sep 17-19:
Cavalier (Jam) 1-2 Real Hope (Hai); Police (Tri) 2-1 Arnett Gardens (Jam)
Sep 25-26:
Real Hope (Hai) 0-0 Arnett Gardens (Jam); Police (Tri) 0-0 Mount Pleasant (Jam)
Oct 3:
Arnett Gardens (Jam) 1-4 Cavalier (Jam); Mount Pleasant (Jam) 0-2 Real Hope (Hai)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cavalier (Q)	4	3	0	1	11	4	9
Real Hope (Q)	4	2	2	0	5	2	8
Police	4	1	2	1	4	6	5
Mount Pleasant	4	1	1	2	2	5	4
Arnett Gardens	4	0	1	3	3	8	1

Group B

Sep 17-18:
Port of Spain (Tri) 1-1 Grenades (Atg); Moca (Dom) 3-1 Ouanaminthe (Hai)
Sep 24:
Ouanaminthe (Hai) 2-2 Grenades (Atg); Port of Spain (Tri) 2-3 Cibao (Dom)
Oct 1:
Grenades (Atg) 1-2 Moca (Dom); Cibao (Dom) 4-1 Ouanaminthe (Hai)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cibao (Q)	4	3	1	0	9	4	10
Moca (Q)	4	3	1	0	8	4	10
Port of Spain	4	0	2	2	6	8	2
Grenades	4	0	2	2	5	7	2
Ouanaminthe	4	0	2	2	5	10	2

2024 US OPEN CUP

Quarter-finals

Jul 9-10:
Atlanta United 1-2 Indy Eleven; Sacramento Republic 1-2 Seattle Sounders; Sporting Kansas City 2-1 FC Dallas (*AET*); Los Angeles FC 3-1 New Mexico United

Semi-finals

Aug 27-28:
Sporting Kansas City 2-0 Indy Eleven; Seattle Sounders 0-1 Los Angeles FC

Final

Sep 25 – Los Angeles
Los Angeles FC 3 (Giroud 53, Campos 102, Kamara 109)
Sporting Kansas City 1 (Thommy 60)
After Extra-Time

2024 CANADIAN CHAMPIONSHIP

Final

Sep 25:
Vancouver Whitecaps 0-0 Toronto FC
(Vancouver Whitecaps win 4-2 on pens)

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cibao*	21	13	6	2	43	16	45
Universidad O&M*	21	10	8	3	31	15	38
Moca*	21	9	8	4	38	21	35
Delfines Del Este*	21	7	9	5	35	32	30
Atletico Pantoja*	21	7	6	8	45	30	27
Atlantico*	21	7	5	9	23	26	26
Vega Real	21	6	7	8	21	25	25
San Cristobal	21	0	1	20	6	77	1

**Advance to Championship Round*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cibao* (C)	10	5	4	1	17	8	19
Atletico Pantoja*	10	4	5	1	21	10	17
Universidad O&M*	10	3	5	2	9	8	14
Moca*	10	4	1	5	10	13	13
Delfines Del Este	10	2	3	5	12	15	9
Atlantico	10	1	4	5	11	26	7

**Advance to finals stage*

Finals Stage

Semi-Finals

Sep 1-2:
Universidad O&M 1-2 Atletico Pantoja;
Moca 0-0 Cibao
Sep 14-15:
Cibao 3-0 Moca (agg 3-0);
Atletico Pantoja 2-3 Universidad O&M
(agg 4-4, *Universidad O&M win 4-2 on pens*)

Final

Sep 21: Universidad O&M 2-1 Cibao
Sep 28: Cibao 3-1 Universidad O&M
(agg 4-3, *After Extra-Time*)

ASIA

2024-25 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

West Region

Matchday 1

Sep 16 – Al Ain
Al Ain (UAE) 1 (M. Palacios 80)
Al Sadd (Qat) 1 (Afif 45+1)

Sep 16 – Baghdad
Al Shorta (Irq) 1 (Yaseen 24)
Al Nassr (KSA) 1 (Al Ghannam 14)

Sep 16 – Qods
Esteghlal (Irn) 3 (A. Yousif 4 og, Rezaeian 79, Rezavand 88)
Al Gharafa (Qat) 0

Sep 16 – Jeddah
Al Ahli (KSA) 1 (Kessie 2)
Persepolis (Irn) 0

Sep 17 – Tashkent
Pakhtakor (Uzb) 0
Al Wasl (UAE) 1 (Bouftini 64)

Sep 17 – Al Rayyan
Al Rayyan (Qat) 1 (Guedes 47)
Al Hilal (KSA) 3 (Milinkovic-Savic 15, Cancelo 42, Leonardo 44)

Matchday 2

Sep 30 – Doha
Al Sadd (Qat) 2 (H. Hosseini 40 og, Afif 68 pen)
Esteghlal (Irn) 0

Sep 30 – Qods
Persepolis (Irn) 1 (Alipour 1)
Pakhtakor (Uzb) 1 (D. Ceran 59)

Sep 30 – Dubai
Al Wasl (UAE) 0
Al Ahli (KSA) 2 (Mahrez 3, Ibanez 38)

Sep 30 – Riyadh
Al Nassr (KSA) 2 (Mane 45+1, Ronaldo 76)
Al Rayyan (Qat) 1 (Guedes 87)

Oct 1 – Al Khor
Al Gharafa (Qat) 4 (Joselu 45+2, 48, Sano 54, Brahimi 76)
Al Ain (UAE) 2 (Kaku 56 pen, Rahimi 66)

Oct 1 – Riyadh
Al Hilal (KSA) 5 (Leonardo 11, Mitrovic 15, S. Al Dawsari 47, N. Al Dawsari 73, Kanno 90+5)
Al Shorta (Irq) 0

East Region

Matchday 1

Sep 17 – Gwangju
Gwangju (Kor) 7 (Asani 2, 55, 90+2, Oh Hu-seong 15, Mikeltadze 69, Lee Heui-kyun 72, Tigrao 75)
Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn) 3 (Elber 34, 59, Nishimura 85)

Sep 17 – Jinan
Shandong Taishan (Chn) 3 (Bi Jinhao 8, Qazaishvili 74, 88)
Central Coast Mariners (Aus) 1 (Doka 45+9 pen)

Sep 17 – Buriram
Buriram United (Tha) 0
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 0

Sep 17 – Shanghai
Shanghai Shenhua (Chn) 4 (Andre Luis 64, Malele 71, 82, Gao Tianyi 84)
Pohang Steelers (Kor) 1 (Jorge Luiz 53)

Sep 18 – Ulsan
Ulsan HD (Kor) 0
Kawasaki Frontale (Jpn) 1 (Marcinho 54)

Sep 18 – Shanghai
Shanghai Port (Chn) 2 (Gustavo 48, W. Popp 73)
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 2 (Arif 45, 56)

Matchday 2

Oct 1 – Gosford
Central Coast Mariners (Aus) 1 (Mauragis 90+5)
Buriram United (Tha) 2 (Bissoli 30, Good 50)

Oct 1 – Kawsaki
Kawasaki Frontale (Jpn) 0
Gwangju (Kor) 1 (Asani 21 pen)

Oct 1 – Pohang
Pohang Steelers (Kor) 3 (Wanderson 52, Hong Yun-sang 65, Han Chan-hee 71)
Shanghai Port (Chn) 0

Oct 1 – Johor Bahru
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 3 (Arif Aiman 11, Obregon 26, Muniz 80)
Shanghai Shenhua (Chn) 0

Oct 2 – Kobe
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 2 (Miyashiro 14, Sakai 51)
Shandong Taishan (Chn) 1 (Cryzan 28)

Oct 2 – Yokohama
Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn) 4 (Watanabe 4 pen, Nishimura 44, Lopes 83, Mizunuma 90+2)
Ulsan HD (Kor) 0

2024-25 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

West Region

Group A

Sep 18:
Mohun Bagan (Ind) 0–0 Ravshan Kulob (Tjk);
Al Wakrah (Qat) 0–3 Tractor (Irn)
Oct 2:
Ravshan Kulob (Tjk) 0-1 Al Wakrah (Qat);
Tractor (Irn) p-p Mohun Bagan (Ind)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tractor	1	1	0	0	3	0	3
Al Wakrah	2	1	0	1	1	3	3
Mohun Bagan	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
Ravshan Kulob	2	0	1	1	0	1	1

Group B

Sep 18:
Al Khaldiya (Bhr) 2–3 Al Taawoun (KSA);
Al Quwa Al Jawiya (Irq) 2–1 Altyn Asyr (Tkm)
Oct 2:
Altyn Asyr (Tkm) 0-1 Al Khaldiya (Bhr);
Al Taawoun (KSA) 1-2 Al Quwa Al Jawiya (Irq)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Quwa Al Jawiya	2	2	0	0	4	2	6
Al Taawoun	2	1	0	1	4	4	3
Al Khaldiya	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Altyn Asyr	2	0	0	2	1	3	0

Group C

Sep 17:
Al Wehdat (Jor) 2–1 Sepahan (Irn);
Istiklol (Tjk) 0–1 Sharjah (UAE)
Oct 1:
Sepahan (Irn) 4-0 Istiklol (Tjk);
Sharjah (UAE) 2-2 Al Wehdat (Jor)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Wehdat	2	1	1	0	4	3	4
Sharjah	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Sepahan	2	1	0	1	5	2	3
Istiklol	2	0	0	2	0	5	0

Group D

Sep 18:
Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) 3–1 Al Hussein Irbid (Jor);
Al Kuwait (Kuw) 0–0 Nasaf Qarshi (Uzb)
Oct 2:
Nasaf Qarshi (Uzb) 2-1 Shabab Al Ahli (UAE);
Al Hussein Irbid (Jor) 2-1 Al Kuwait (Kuw)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nasaf Qarshi	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Shabab Al Ahli	2	1	0	1	4	3	3
Al Hussein Irbid	2	1	0	1	3	4	3
Al Kuwait	2	0	1	1	1	2	1

East Region

Group E

Sep 19:
Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jpn) 3-0 Kaya–Iloilo (Phi);
Sydney FC (Aus) 5-0 Eastern (Hkg)
Oct 3:
Kaya–Iloilo (Phi) 1-4 Sydney FC (Aus);
Eastern (Hkg) 2-3 Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jpn)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sydney FC	2	2	0	0	9	1	6
Sanfrecce Hiroshima	2	2	0	0	6	2	6
Eastern	2	0	0	2	2	8	0
Kaya-Iloilo	2	0	0	2	1	7	0

Group F

Sep 19: Persib Bandung (Idn) 0-1 Port (Tha);
Lion City Sailors (Sgp) 2-0 Zhejiang (Chn)
Oct 3: Zhejiang (Chn) 1-0 Persib Bandung (Idn)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lion City Sailors	1	1	0	0	2	0	3
Port	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
Zhejiang	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Persib Bandung	2	0	0	2	0	2	0

Group G

Sep 18: Lee Man (Hkg) 0–2 Nam Dinh (Vie);
Bangkok United (Tha) 4–2 Tampines Rovers (Sgp)
Oct 2: Nam Dinh (Vie) 0-0 Bangkok United (Tha); Tampines Rovers (Sgp) 3-1 Lee Man (Hkg)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bangkok Utd	2	1	1	0	4	2	4
Nam Dinh	2	1	1	0	2	0	4
Tampines Rovers	2	1	0	1	5	5	3
Lee Man	2	0	0	2	1	5	0

Group H

Sep 19:
Muangthong United (Tha) 1-1 Selangor (Mas);
DH Cebu (Phi) 0-6 Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor)
Oct 3:
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor) 4-1 Muangthong United (Tha); Selangor (Mas) 1-0 DH Cebu (Phi)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jeonbuk HM	2	2	0	0	10	1	6
Selangor	2	0	1	0	1	1	1
Muangthong Utd	2	0	1	1	2	5	1
DH Cebu	2	0	0	1	0	6	0

GUAM

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sidekicks	12	8	0	4	67	26	24
UOG	12	6	0	6	42	37	18
Islanders	12	3	1	8	44	86	10
Beercelona	12	3	0	9	20	71	9
Dededo SC	12	0	0	12	10	109	0

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wings	12	12	0	0	158	9	36
Strykers	12	10	0	2	78	12	30
Southern Cobras	12	7	0	5	50	44	21
Guam Shipyard	12	5	1	6	55	72	16
Crushers	12	3	0	9	26	104	9

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Rovers	12	12	0	0	126	8	36
Quality	12	9	0	3	87	13	27
Southern Heat	12	8	1	3	48	34	25
Tigers	12	1	1	10	15	96	4
Tumon	12	1	0	11	8	113	3

Overall Table

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wings* (C)	12	12	0	0	158	9	36
Rovers*	12	12	0	0	126	8	36
Strykers*	12	10	0	2	78	12	30
Quality*	12	9	0	3	87	13	27
Southern Heat**	12	8	1	3	48	34	25
Sidekicks**	12	8	0	4	67	26	24
Southern Cobras**	12	7	0	5	50	44	21
UOG**	12	6	0	6	42	37	18
Guam Shipyard**	12	5	1	6	55	72	16
Islanders***	12	3	1	8	44	86	10
Beercelona***	12	3	0	9	20	71	9
Crushers***	12	3	0	9	26	104	9
Tigers***	12	1	1	10	15	96	4
Tumon***	12	1	0	11	8	113	3
Dededo SC***	12	0	0	12	10	109	0

**Advance to semi-finals*
***Advance to second-round play-offs*
****Advance to first-round play-offs*

First Round Play-Offs

Aug 18:
Dededo SC 1-4 Crushers; Tumon 0-4 Beercelona; Tigers 4-14 Islanders

Second Round Play-Offs

Aug 31-Sep 1:
Southern Heat 8-0 Crushers; Sidekicks 5-0 Beercelona; Southern Cobras 9-1 Islanders; UOG 3-4 Guam Shipyard

Play-Offs Finals

Sep 15:
Southern Heat 1-5 Guam Shipyard;
Sidekicks 2-4 Southern Cobras

Seventh Place Play-Off

Sep 22:
Southern Heat 1-4 Sidekicks

Fifth Place Play-Off

Sep 22:
Guam Shipyard 3-1 Southern Cobras

Semi-Finals

Aug 25:
Wings 6-1 Quality; Rovers 9-0 Strykers

Third Place Play-Off

Sep 8:
Strykers 6-6 Quality (*Quality win 4-2 on pens*)

Final

Sep 8:
Wings 3-2 Rovers

OCEANIA

FIJI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Rewa (C)	18	13	4	1	43	14	43
Labasa	18	9	5	4	29	23	32
Lautoka	18	10	1	7	45	37	31
Navua	18	8	5	5	31	23	29
Ba	18	8	4	6	31	26	28
Nadi	18	7	4	7	32	33	25
Suva	18	6	4	8	33	35	22
Nadroga	18	5	2	11	29	43	17
Nasinu	18	5	0	13	20	40	15
Tailevu Naitasiri (R)	18	3	3	12	17	36	12

SOLOMON ISLANDS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Central Coast (C)	22	16	5	1	70	18	53
Solomon Warriors	22	16	4	2	76	21	52
Real Kakamora	22	14	3	5	58	23	45
Laugu United	22	12	7	3	43	21	43
Henderson Eels	22	10	6	6	45	35	36
Marist	22	10	4	8	36	39	34
Waneagu United	22	9	6	7	35	33	33
Honiara City	22	4	5	13	42	63	17
SOSA	22	4	5	13	25	56	17
KOSSA	22	4	5	13	31	65	17
Southern United	22	3	5	14	19	51	14
Juniper (R)	22	1	3	18	23	78	6

Internationals

2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

SOUTH AMERICA Section

Fixtures

Matchday 11

Nov 13-14:
Uruguay v Colombia; Peru v Chile; Venezuela v Brazil; Paraguay v Argentina; Ecuador v Bolivia

Matchday 12

Nov 18-19:
Colombia v Ecuador; Brazil v Uruguay; Bolivia v Paraguay; Argentina v Peru; Chile v Venezuela

ASIA Section

Third Round Fixtures

Group A

Nov 14: Qatar v Uzbekistan; United Arab Emirates v Kyrgyzstan; North Korea v Iran
Nov 19: United Arab Emirates v Qatar; Kyrgyzstan v Iran; North Korea v Uzbekistan

Group B

Nov 14: Iraq v Jordan; Oman v Palestine; Kuwait v South Korea
Nov 19: Oman v Iraq; Palestine v South Korea; Kuwait v Jordan

Group C

Nov 14: Australia v Saudi Arabia; Bahrain v China; Indonesia v Japan
Nov 19: Bahrain v Australia; China v Japan; Indonesia v Saudi Arabia

OCEANIA Section

Second Round Fixtures

Group A

Nov 14: Solomon Islands v New Caledonia; Papua New Guinea v Fiji
Nov 17: Fiji v New Caledonia; Papua New Guinea v Solomon Islands

Group B

Nov 15:
Samoa v Tahiti; New Zealand v Vanuatu
Nov 18:
Tahiti v Vanuatu; Samoa v New Zealand

2024-25 UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

Group Fixtures

Group A1

Nov 15: Portugal v Poland; Scotland v Croatia
Nov 18: Croatia v Portugal; Poland v Scotland

Group A2

Nov 14: Belgium v Italy; France v Israel
Nov 17: Israel v Belgium; Italy v France

Group A3

Nov 16: Germany v Bosnia & Herzegovina; Netherlands v Hungary
Nov 19: Bosnia & Herzegovina v Netherlands; Hungary v Germany

Group A4

Nov 15: Denmark v Spain; Switzerland v Serbia
Nov 18: Serbia v Denmark; Spain v Switzerland

Group B1

Nov 16: Georgia v Ukraine; Albania v Czech Rep
Nov 19: Albania v Ukraine; Czech Rep v Georgia

Group B2

Nov 14:
Greece v England; Republic of Ireland v Finland
Nov 17:
England v Republic of Ireland; Finland v Greece

Group B3

Nov 14: Kazakhstan v Austria; Slovenia v Norway
Nov 17: Austria v Slovenia; Norway v Kazakhstan

Group B4

Nov 16: Montenegro v Iceland; Turkey v Wales
Nov 19: Montenegro v Turkey; Wales v Iceland

Group C1

Nov 16: Azerbaijan v Estonia; Sweden v Slovakia
Nov 19: Slovakia v Estonia; Sweden v Azerbaijan

Group C2

Nov 15: Cyprus v Lithuania; Romania v Kosovo
Nov 18: Kosovo v Lithuania; Romania v Cyprus

Group C3

Nov 15: Luxembourg v Bulgaria; Northern Ireland v Belarus
Nov 18: Bulgaria v Belarus; Luxembourg v Northern Ireland

Group C4

Nov 14: Armenia v Faroe Islands; North Macedonia v Latvia
Nov 17: Latvia v Armenia; North Macedonia v Faroe Islands

Group D1

Nov 15: San Marino v Gibraltar
Nov 18: Liechtenstein v San Marino

Group D2

Nov 16: Andorra v Moldova
Nov 19: Malta v Andorra

2024-25 CONCACAF NATIONS LEAGUE

Fixtures

Quarter-Finals

Nov 14-18: Fixtures TBC

● *The top two teams in Groups A and B in League A qualify for the quarter-finals with the four pre-seeded teams (Canada, Mexico, Panama and United States), who receive byes. The quarter-finals take place over two legs*

Group B1

Nov 14: Montserrat v St Vincent & Grenadines; Bonaire v El Salvador
Nov 17: El Salvador v Montserrat; St Vincent & Grenadines v Bonaire

Group B2

Nov 15:
St Lucia v Grenada; Saint Martin v Curacao
Nov 18:
Curacao v St Lucia; Grenada v Saint Martin

Group B3

Nov 15:
Puerto Rico v Aruba; Sint Maarten v Haiti
Nov 18:
Haiti v Puerto Rico; Aruba v Sint Maarten

Group B4

Nov 16: Bermuda v Antigua & Barbuda; Dominica v Dominican Republic
Nov 19: Dominican Republic v Bermuda; Antigua & Barbuda v Dominica

Play-Ins

Nov 14-19: Fixtures TBC

● *The three League C group winners and best runners-up enter the play-in round for the 2025 CONCACAF Gold Cup – where qualifying is coupled with the Nations League – along with the four teams placed fifth and sixth in League A. The play-in ties take place over two legs*

AFCON 2025 QUALIFYING

Fixtures

Group A

Nov 13-15:
Gambia v Comoros; Madagascar v Tunisia
Nov 17-19:
Tunisia v Gambia; Comoros v Madagascar

Group B

Nov 13-15: Lesotho v Central Africa Republic; Gabon v Morocco
Nov 17-19: Morocco v Lesotho; Central Africa Republic v Gabon

Group C

Nov 13-15:
Botswana v Mauritania; Cape Verde v Egypt
Nov 17-19:
Egypt v Botswana; Mauritania v Cape Verde

Group D

Nov 13-15: Rwanda v Libya; Benin v Nigeria
Nov 17-19: Nigeria v Rwanda v Libya v Benin

Group E

Nov 13-15:
Liberia v Togo; Equatorial Guinea v Algeria
Nov 17-19:
Algeria v Liberia; Togo v Equatorial Guinea

Group F

Nov 13-15: Niger v Sudan; Angola v Ghana
Nov 17-19: Ghana v Niger; Sudan v Angola

Group G

Nov 13-15:
Chad v Sierra Leone; Zambia v Ivory Coast
Nov 17-19:
Ivory Coast v Chad; Sierra Leone v Zambia

Group H

Nov 13-15:
Ethiopia v Tanzania; Guinea v DR Congo
Nov 17-19:
DR Congo v Ethiopia; Tanzania v Guinea

Group I

Nov 13-15:
Eswatini v Guinea-Bissau; Mozambique v Mali
Nov 17-19:
Mali v Eswatini; Guinea-Bissau v Mozambique

Group J

Nov 13-15:
Zimbabwe v Kenya; Namibia v Cameroon
Nov 17-19:
Cameroon v Zimbabwe; Kenya v Namibia

Group K

Nov 13-15:
South Sudan v Congo; Uganda v South Africa
Nov 17-19:
South Africa v South Sudan; Congo v Uganda

Group L

Nov 13-15:
Burundi v Malawi; Burkina Faso v Senegal
Nov 17-19:
Senegal v Burundi; Malawi v Burkina Faso

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Hans Krankl

Austria v West Germany

1978 World Cup, Cordoba

Austria's meeting with their neighbours in Argentina was not only an historic victory, it also proved to be the prequel to one of the most controversial matches in World Cup history. Austrian goal-getter Krankl had a front-row seat for both...

Star man...Krankl in action at the 1978 World Cup

"In my international career with Austria there were many memorable games but, of course, the high points were the World Cup participations in Argentina 1978 and Spain 1982.

In Argentina, our team was sensational. We were in a tough group with Brazil, Spain and Sweden, and each of those nations probably thought they would have an easy task against us. But it all turned out differently.

We beat Spain and Sweden, lost 1-0 to Brazil in an even game and finished top of the group. Nowadays young people would find it difficult to believe that we won in a group with Brazil, Spain and Sweden, but we did it.

Back then there wasn't a knockout stage but a second group phase, where we lost to the Netherlands and Italy before the last game against West Germany. In competitive terms it was a meaningless game for us, but the Germans still had the chance to reach the third place play-off.

We were better than Germany, I scored two goals and we beat them 3-2. At that time, we didn't understand the importance of that win or the effect my goals and the team would have on people. All of that came later. In that moment of joy, when I scored the winning goal, I was just happy that I scored. It was only later that it became clear to us that it was Austria's first win over the "big brother" in 47 years; the big brother who was used to looking down on us. It was great. It was a big win and a piece of Austrian football history.

The World Cup in Spain 1982 didn't go too well for us. The camaraderie and our connection with the coach didn't work out. I think that if we had the right coach in 1982, maybe we could have achieved even more, but we weren't able to play as well as we did in 1978.

Still, after victories against Chile and Algeria, we had practically secured a place in the second stage. The last group game we lost 1-0 to West Germany, who needed a win to go through, while we would have been eliminated only in the case of a high defeat.

Inevitably, I'm always asked about that infamous game and I can only repeat what I said many times before: it was not a fixed game. But after they scored, the German players started saying: 'Let's take it easy guys, with this score we're both through.'

At that World Cup, we were not physically very well prepared and we were not in top shape for that game. It's true that it was an ugly game, that it was terrible to watch, that it was only about both teams passing the ball around in midfield, without an intention to attack. But believe me, if I had a chance to score, if I had received a ball in the box, I surely would have scored and sent the Germans back home."

Interview by Vladimir Novak

> "I scored two goals and we beat them 3-2...it was Austria's first win over the 'big brother' in 47 years"

Historic strike... Krankl watches his winning goal against West Germany go in

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